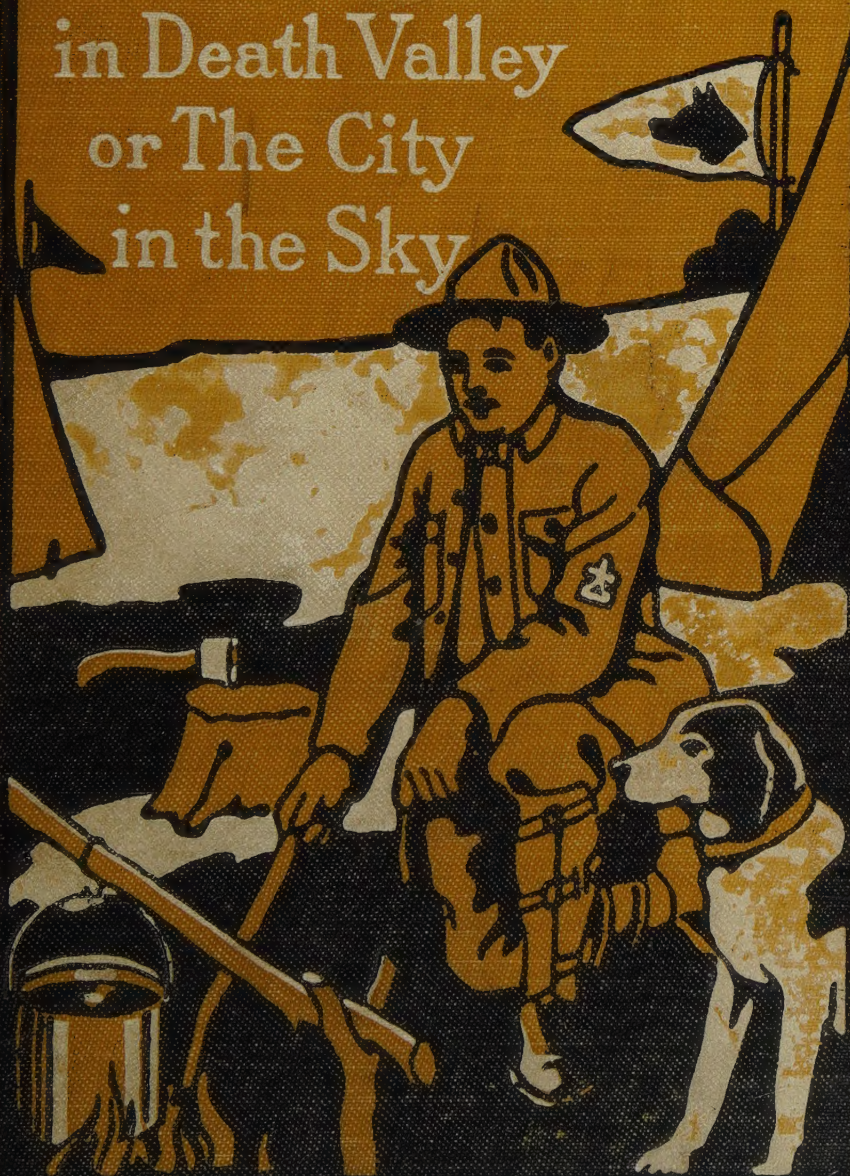


Boy Scouts

in Death Valley
or The City
in the Sky





BOY SCOUTS IN DEATH VALLEY

OR

THE CITY IN THE
SKY

CHS-556

By

G. HARVEY RALPHSON

Author of

BOY SCOUTS IN THE CANAL ZONE
BOY SCOUTS IN THE NORTHWEST
BOY SCOUTS IN A MOTOR BOAT
BOY SCOUTS IN A SUBMARINE



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Boy Scouts in Death Valley;

Or, The City in the Sky.

By G. HARVEY RALPHSON

CHAPTER I.

ON THE BORDER OF THE DESERT.

"So that's the terrible Mojave Desert out there, Ned?"

"Just what it is, Jimmy."

"And how soon do we tackle the sandy stretch in our husky old auto that Harry drives so slow; you'd think this was a funeral procession instead of a glorious joy ride?"

"That will all come along soon enough, Jimmy, so don't you worry. We're sticking to the foothills here as long as we can, because once we cut loose, there's going to be some rough sledding for the machine before we ever get to the Telescope Range of mountains away over to the northeast."

"And after that comes Death Valley, don't it, Ned?"

"That's what it does, Jimmy. Even here the going is bad, and Harry has all sorts of engine

trouble, so you can give a guess what it's apt to be later on, when we tackle the hardest part of the trip."

"But not one of the four of us has got any signs of cold feet yet, I notice; and when you stop to think what a bunch of things we've rubbed up against before now, that's just what you'd expect. Scouts who can take care of themselves like we've always done hadn't ought to be afraid of a little hot sand, and getting thirsty. That makes me remember I'd like another drink."

"It's a good thing we've got a keg along to hold water, Jimmy, because you're as dry as a fish bone every ten minutes."

"Yes," added a boy who had not up to then entered into the conversation, "better put a curb on that thirst of yours, Jimmy, before we break away from the hills, or you'll run the well dry in less than no time, as sure as my name's Jack Bosworth."

There were four lads in the old car, all of them wearing the well-known khaki suits that distinguish Boy Scouts throughout the whole civilized world. All of them seemed to be self-reliant young chaps, and the one who went by the name of Ned Nestor in particular had a most resolute look on his face, that stamped him far above the ordinary run of patrol leaders.

For the sake of any new readers who may not

have followed the varied fortunes of these wide-awake scouts in previous volumes of this series, perhaps a few words of introduction and explanation may be necessary at this stage, before we take up the newest and most thrilling story of their adventures.

They were all members in good standing of a New York City troop of scouts, and with the exception of Jimmy McGraw, the sons of well-to-do parents. He was somewhat smaller than his mates, and possessed carrotty red hair, as well as a shrewd freckled face. Truth to tell, Jimmy had at one time been a typical Bowery newsboy, until Ned made his acquaintance and induced his father to virtually adopt Jimmy.

Ned himself had for some time past really been in the employ of the Secret Service of the Government at Washington. It had been found that as a clever boy he could accomplish many things apt to prove failures in the hands of a man, because few people would ever suspect that affairs of magnitude would be intrusted to a mere lad.

Jack Bosworth was the son of a capitalist and corporation lawyer. He was rather slender of build and with a dark complexion; but the resolute light in his eyes told of an unquenchable ambition, and a purpose that could not be easily stayed.

The fourth and last member of the party was

Harry Stevens. His father was an automobile manufacturer in the East, and Harry had been given a chance to learn considerable about the making and running of modern cars. He had even on occasion accompanied celebrated drivers in the road races, where additional glory had been won for the machine which the Stevens Company built.

But evidently Harry was having the time of his life in managing to coax the old "tinderbox," as Jimmy called it, which he now handled; for every little while the eccentric engine would play him a new trick and had to be coaxed and watched, as a nurse might a lively baby.

These four energetic scouts had come across the great continent to California on a trip that combined business with pleasure. It was not their first visit to the Golden State, though they had never set eyes on this southern part of it before.

After a hurried trip to San Francisco, and then to Los Angeles, they had purchased this ramshackle car, the best they could afford, and started to reach a cattle ranch several hundred miles away, where an uncle of Harry Stevens awaited their coming, with more or less anxiety. It was the intention of the boys to dispose of the old car, when they were ready to leave the ranch, which was one reason they had not invested more money in a purchase; though they

were fated to see times when this policy seemed to have been an unwise one.

Ned was an old and experienced traveler. It would be hard to say where he had not roamed during the last few years of his adventurous life. Mexico, the Philippines, the Panama Canal Zone, up close to the Arctic Circle, around Hudson Bay, up in the air with an aeroplane, down under the ocean depths in a submarine—all these and more had been his portion, thanks to the advantages which his connection with the United States Government gave him.

Jack had a hobby, and a most enjoyable one at that. He carried his quick-action camera along with him wherever he went, and was devoted to snapping off flashlight pictures of such wild animals as he could run across during the course of his wanderings.

Already he had quite an interesting collection of the same, and openly threatened to coax his chum, Ned, to accompany him on an extended hunting trip into the heart of the African wilderness, following in the footsteps of Roosevelt, not to shoot big game with soft-nosed or dum dum bullets, but with his camera.

Harry's specialty was history. His head was crammed with all sorts of ideas connected with the ancient people who lived in the Southwest, many hundred years before Columbus discovered there was such a place as America. It was

Harry's ambition, while on this trip, to get among the cliff dwellings of the strange Zuni Indians, and study their habits, as well as witness some of their weird ceremonial dances. He was forever talking about this sort of thing, just as boys will when they have given themselves heart and soul to a hobby.

If Jimmy had any pet ideas which he catered to, they certainly ran along very practical lines. He was usually the first to sit down when a meal was ready, and the very last to sigh and declare that he could hold no more on that occasion, but that he hoped to "come again." So that it can be easily understood that Jimmy liked his rations about as well as anybody could; also that he was never known to miss a meal, though often warned that he might find himself up against that distressing proposition, while flirting with the great American Desert, where supply stores are only conspicuous by their utter absence.

After ruminating for a little while on what had been said, Jimmy again returned to the attack, and it was toward Ned, as the real leader of the expedition, that he directed his batteries.

Jimmy had altered his ways more or less since taking up his abode with Ned Nestor, whom he assisted in his work; still the halo of the Bowery, with some of its slangy language, hovered

around his glowing head, and made itself manifest in much of his discourse.

"But put me wise to this, won't you, Ned, dear; you said we'd spend one more night in camp here by the foothills, before starting to cross over the desert; is that a straight spiel, or am I on the wrong tack?"

"That was what we figured on doing, Jimmy," replied the other; "because it would give us a whole day to make the journey. We wanted to see how an auto would work on sandy stretches, and before we're done with it, I'm thinking now, we'll wish we'd stuck to bronchos instead. But it's too late to turn back now."

"Just as if we ever *did* turn back," ventured Jack, with a vein of pride in his voice. "We've been through a lot of tough times. and always managed to get there."

"Yes, that's so," Ned affirmed, "but all the same there have been times when we'd have given considerable for the chance of starting in differently. The last occasion that I can remember when that happened was up in that wild Hudson Bay country, when our boats were stolen and we found ourselves adrift five hundred miles away from anywhere."

"But we came out of it all right, didn't we?" added Jack; "and that only goes to prove my assertion. But let me tell you, this is about as hot a region as I ever struck. That sun is like

a blazing fireball. Why, it looks like a copper shield, and the sky itself isn't much better."

"That's the way it always seems on deserts, I understand," Harry spoke up, ready to air his knowledge of geography, which he always combined with his studies concerning historical events and happenings.

"If Death Valley is any worse than it seems out there on the sand, say, it must be a corker, sure enough," declared Jimmy, mopping his perspiring brow, and yet at the time he was not exerting himself a particle, only that his mind might be actively endeavoring to figure just how long a lapse of hours must occur before they thought to stop and cook supper.

"Oh! this isn't a circumstance to what that will be, you mark my words," ventured Jack, soothingly. "When we were up in the Arctic regions, I remember hearing you say heaps of times that you'd never yet objected to having warm weather along, and now you're beginning to turn around the other way. First thing we know, we'll be hearing you shout out for a section of that Northern ice and cold blast. Some people are never satisfied."

"You can't say that of me, Jack, when the supper horn has been tooted, and I'm sitting there with a pannikin of bully grub on my knees," Jimmy assured his accuser; "because, just then, I wouldn't change places with the

czar of Russia. And as it is now half-past three, and dark comes about five-thirty in this heathenish country, I take it, we'll only be persisting in pushing on for another hour or so."

"Huh! mebbe much less than that," declared Harry, in a tone of deepest disgust, as the wobbling auto came to a sudden stop.

"What, broke down again, has she?" asked Ned, laughingly, when he saw the acting chauffeur starting to climb from his seat, grumbling as he went.

"Oh! I've been expecting this for some time back," Harry admitted. "I own up that I was dreadfully sold when I bought this bum car. I ought to have been a better judge than to have taken it; but you know we were a bit shy on cash, and besides, she seemed to be a fair sand-pusher, which was what we wanted more than a hill-climber. I'll get busy again, and we may be able to make a few more miles before dark, or else stay here."

"It doesn't matter much either way," remarked Ned, "and the rest of us might as well stretch our legs while we wait. If you want any help, just sing out, Harry."

"I'm glad there are a few trees handy, and that we can sit down in the shade," observed Jack; "because we'd sizzle in that burning sunshine if we had to stay still any length of time. Wonder if I couldn't get a snapshot of Harry working

with his pet engine? It would make us laugh every time we looked at the same."

"Try and see," advised Ned. "This California light always gives splendid results in the photographic line."

"But I notice that you've taken your gun along with you also, Jimmy," said Jack, as he began to examine his camera to make sure it was in fine working order, which was usually the case, as he happened to be a particular boy; "you don't expect to run across any game around this deserted region, do you?"

"You never can tell," replied the patrol leader, for Ned had long been in charge of the Wolf section of the troop, with Jimmy one of the scouts under him; while Jack and Harry belong to the Black Bear Patrol. "There are wolves and coyotes hiding in some of these arroyos running down from the mountains, and they can look pretty savage if you run on them too suddenly."

"Yes," added Jimmy, quickly, "and it's me that wants to get next to a genuine old grizzly bear. I've come out here loaded for bear, and I'll feel pretty punk, let me tell you, if I don't have a chance to fetch a skin home with me."

"You want to look out how you fool with that sort of monster," warned Jack, who had had experience with Jimmy's rash ways many times before, and looked on his present ambition with

a certain amount of suspicion. "They say a wounded grizzly bear is the most terrible of all wild beasts, not even excepting a tiger or a lion. How about that, Ned?"

"I believe that's a fact, though I don't know as much about grizzlies, from actual experience, as I do certain other wild animals. Jimmy's seen them in Central Park, and at the Zoo up in the Bronx, and he thinks he wants to shoot one; but just as you say, Jack, he'd better think twice before he fires and make sure there's a good tree handy, for grizzlies fortunately can't climb."

"Oh! listen to that terrible growl, would you?" exclaimed Jimmy, suddenly coming to a halt; "is that a grizzly bear, do you think, Ned? But on my tintype, it keeps on gettin' louder and louder! Now, if you asked me, I'd say it must be *thunder*, and yet they told us such a thing was never heard at all in this heathen desert country. Then, it must be an earthquake, I'm thinkin'. This is what I call a tough deal with the old engine broke down, and no way of skipping out of the way," and Jimmy almost turned pale with anxiety as he stood there, listening intently to the strange distant series of rumblings that mystified them all.

CHAPTER II.

A GRIZZLY CHASE.

All of the scouts stood there listening, until the last growl had died away.

"If that was an earthquake, me to the tall timber!" burst from Jimmy, when they could no longer hear the strange sounds.

"Seemed more like a big blast to me," remarked Jack; "do you know of any quarrying or mining going on around this section, Ned?"

"There are mines far away to the northeast, around the Tonopah region," replied the other, thoughtfully; "but even if they set off a blast there, we never would be able to hear a whisper down here. I thought I caught something like this once before, but the old engine was keeping up its everlasting noise at the time, and I couldn't make sure."

"It had a queer way of vibrating, didn't it?" asked Harry, beginning to work at his disabled engine again.

"That may have been some kind of echo among the gullies and peaks of the mountains," Ned explained. "But perhaps we'll learn more

about what makes the sound later on. It seemed to come from the quarter in which we're meaning to head, after we break away from these foothills."

"Now, don't put yourself out a bit to meet up with the same," urged Jimmy. "I've heard all the boom I want to, and between the lot of us, I've got my private opinion that may have been a California Rip Van Winkle playing at bowls, with some of the giants of the mountains. They might take a notion to fix up a case on us, like the little men of Dunderberg did for Rip. Think of sleeping twenty years and missing all them good meals. Excuse me, if you please."

"Now, that's just like you, Jimmy, to talk of eating the first thing," complained Harry, as he looked up from his work, and took out his big, red bandana handkerchief with which to mop his streaming face. "I could go without a bite all that time, perhaps; but think of what would happen if I failed to show up at my uncle's ranch? There'd be high old jinks to pay, wouldn't there? That's what makes me so sore about this machine. What if she breaks down so that I can't fix a thing?"

"The walkin' is good around here, they tell me," ventured Jimmy, with a sly grin.

"Chances are you'll change your mind if you have to do much of it," Jack told him. "Think

of pushing through all that burning sand, with a keg of water tied to your back, Jimmy!"

"So you've already made up your mind I've got to carry it, have you?" demanded the other, making a grimace.

"That's only making the punishment fit the crime," chuckled Ned; "because you've got the champion thirst of the crowd. I never saw anybody drink like you do. If your name was Fish now I could understand it; but McGraw doesn't sound like the trickle of water down the side of the mountain. In fact, there isn't anything of water in it."

"But there will be mighty soon, then," advised Jimmy, as he went around to get the jug in which they kept a portion of their supply of drinking water, and which he seemed to love to tilt up over his elbow, as he had seen miners and other workers do on occasion.

"On second thought," Ned continued, as he watched these preparations, "it might be the worst thing we could do to allow Jimmy to tote the water keg in case we had to hoof it over the desert."

"Yes," chimed in Harry, "for chances are, when any of us wanted a drink, we'd find that he'd drained it to the last drop. He isn't to be trusted with anything to eat or drink, because he just loses his head, and never knows when to stop."

"Keep it goin'," gurgled the object of all this talk, as he halted in his operations long enough to take a long breath; "it's me own private opinion that before we get to that cattle ranch belongin' to Harry's uncle, you'll be havin' poor Jimmy stood up at twenty paces in front of a firin' squad, and peppered good and hard; for he must be a pretty tough character, from all I hear. But when I see you wipin' your hands like that, Harry, I reckon the engine has consented to act fair decent for a little time, at least, and tackle the sand again."

"Yes, it seems to have gotten over its sulk, and is able to put up another turn at this everlasting grind," the chauffeur admitted; "so better pile aboard, the lot of you. No telling what tricks the old junk pile might play on us. You know how once she started off without me in the car, thinking to leave us all in the lurch; and, perhaps, that would have happened, if Ned here hadn't been so placed he could give a jump, and hanging on behind climb over the tonneau, so as to handle the brake. Even then, didn't she groan as if she felt mad because the trick hadn't panned out? All aboard for Death Valley!"

Jimmy was the last to get up from where he had been lying in the shade of the three trees. He appeared to have had his attention attracted toward something that was moving over among

the rocks marking the foot of the rise, where the fissures and arroyos seamed the unattractive face of the lower mountainside.

As he looked, with his heart beginning to beat more rapidly than its wont, Jimmy suddenly made a startling discovery. A moving object caught his eye that gradually rose above the rocks until he made out the shaggy body of a monstrous bear.

Jimmy knew that he was looking at a genuine grizzly, for he had seen them on other occasions, more frequently than his comrades gave him credit for.

He glanced around at his companions, and found that they were already climbing aboard the car. The engine was working merrily, just as though it had not a trouble in the wide world. It was this throbbing that had evidently excited the curiosity of the bear, for Jimmy could now see that the animal had come to a halt, and was apparently observing the strange intruder with more or less wonder.

"It's the chance of a lifetime!" Jimmy was saying to himself.

He kept fingering the lock of his gun, while trying to decide whether he dared fire or not. The warnings which his chums had thrown his way lingered in his memory, but Jimmy was a bold lad, and hated to take a dare, which he seemed to think the monstrous grizzly was

throwing up at him, by offering him such an opening.

Jimmy was slowly backing, and had now covered half the distance separating him from the automobile. Just then, the animal changed its position and offered such a fine mark that the temptation proved more than weak Jimmy could stand.

So he raised his gun to his shoulder and took a hasty aim. As he was in the act of pulling the trigger he heard Jack give a sudden yell, and that must have startled the marksman, for his aim proved bad. Instead of falling in a heap, the bear gave utterance to a fearful roar, and immediately started in hot haste toward the spot where Jimmy stood.

Something was apt to go wrong with Jimmy's weapon when he got excited. He tried to pump out the used brass cartridge, and throw another into the firing chamber; but clumsy in his actions, he only jammed the mechanism of the repeating rifle so that for the time being it refused to work.

"Run, Jimmy, or he'll get you!" shrieked Harry.

"Hurry, boy!" added Ned, as steadily as he could, under such exciting conditions.

Jimmy knew that it was his only course. Had he been able to manage that gun as he wanted, perhaps he would have scorned to flee, so long

as there was a single bullet remaining in the magazine; but it was a different proposition when he could not raise a hand to defend himself, for even his fine hunting knife happened to be in the car with his pack.

And so he turned and sprinted like a good fellow for the waiting car, where Harry sat ready to make a flying start as soon as the rash marksman had arrived.

Fortunately the distance was short, and Jimmy was possessed of a good pair of legs built for running. He did manage to trip and fall down, even as he looked back over his shoulder at the oncoming enemy, and Jack uttered a groan, thinking that this accident might allow the angry bear to come up with Jimmy. But it took more than a little tumble of that nature to put Jimmy out of the running. He scrambled to his feet, and was instantly making for the car with huge bounds, being by this time quite a little disturbed himself, on account of the ferocious appearance of the four-footed enemy.

Jack was standing up and aiming his camera at the picture, which he seemed to think would make a good one to remember. It might be used with good effect on Jimmy in the future, whenever he showed symptoms of getting rash.

"Sit down, Jack!" ordered Ned, who was afraid the other might be jostled out of the car

when Harry started with a jerk; for the runner had by this time about arrived.

It was Ned who bent down, and seizing Jimmy by the arm, dragged him in over the side, even as the chauffeur opened up, and the car went off with a bound.

Instead of causing the wounded bear to stop in his advance and stare at the odd object that had invaded his lonely retreat, this flight of the car only seemed to urge him on to renewed exertions, for he ran faster than before.

The car jolted and jumped and did all sorts of strange things. Harry was keeping his eyes fixed upon what lay in front of them, and had enough work there to occupy his entire attention. The other three, though, were crouching in the car, and watching the coming of the bear, plainly with great and growing excitement.

"Is he gaining any on us, Ned?" asked Jimmy, still working desperately with the mechanism of his rifle, which evidently was in a bad way, rendering the weapon utterly useless for the present.

"We seem to be holding our own," replied the leader of the Wolf Patrol, "and if Harry can keep the car from upsetting and the cranky engine doesn't give down on us, we'll like as not tire the beast out. But he's as mad as anything, and while you wounded him, because I can see

blood on his breast, it didn't cripple the old chap worth a cent."

"See what you've gone and done, Jimmy," Jack went on to say, reprovably; "if we come to hand-grips with that big buster, it'll all be your fault. Ned warned you not to shoot if you ran across a grizzly, you remember."

The words were fairly jerked out of Jack, on account of the whimsical movements of the jumping car, as inequalities in the ground were met with.

"He said to be sure there was a tree handy," Jimmy answered back, "and sure there were three of the same, though I thought I'd rather take chances with the buzz-wagon, seein' that the rest of you were all in the same. I only hope we don't get a puncture right now, or meet up with a bad place in the going. Say, he keeps on gettin' bigger'n bigger, don't he? If it goes on that way, I reckon now that he'll be as high as old Beasley's barn, down Flatbush way, which they say looks like a church."

"What's the best word, Ned?" Jack continued, trying to calm his nerves. "If he gains on us, or something happens to the machine, what next?"

"Keep your gun handy, that's all," came the ready reply. "And Jimmy, quit fooling with that rifle, if you've gone and got it jammed. Take Harry's, and hold yourself ready to pour

in a broadside. Aim for the shoulder, if you can see his side. Only a chunk of lead in the heart will stop the rush of a grizzly, they say; and hold on to the car, because any time we might take a jolt that would throw you out."

This warning was enough for the other two boys. They shuddered at the very idea of such a thing happening, with that furious monster coming after them so persistently.

"Hi! there, Harry, what you doing?" called Jack. "It's getting worse and worse the further we go!" ejaculated the driver, who was undoubtedly doing his very best, but could not accomplish impossibilities; "and as sure as anything there's trouble for us ahead. It looks like we couldn't make it, Ned!"

"Then turn out on to the sand!" advised Ned; "we'll have it open running there, if only we can go fast enough. Full speed, Harry, and coax her to do her best!"

The scout at the steering wheel did as he was told, and changing his course somewhat, began to plough through the dry sand that had blown in from the desert.

It was indeed lucky for them that the machine had been fitted with broad tires calculated for going well over the sand. Their pace may have been held up a trifle, but then the charging beast also suffered in the same way on less secure footing. At least, Ned could not see that there

was any relative change in their positions, though surely the hot chase must be gradually exhausting the grizzly.

He sincerely hoped the animal would weary of the fruitless pursuit, and give it over. Ned, while a hunter, did not hanker about slaying big game, just for the sake of boasting about his exploits afterwards. As a scout, he tried to plan so that he only took animal life for the sake of food, or in self-defense. And, in this case, while Jimmy had certainly begun the fight, the bear was so bent on keeping it up that, in case of their being brought to close quarters, Ned meant to do everything in his power to slay the monster. It would be a case of getting the grizzly or being "got" by him.

At least, the bumping and racking motion of the car was not nearly so bad, after Harry turned out upon the desert. Possibly when the pursuing beast realized that the chase was taking him away from the rocky ravines and canyons, he might lose some of his grim determination to overtake this queer contrivance that chugged along, and left such a bitter odor behind it. Ned fervently hoped so, at least, as he crouched there and holding his gun ready, tried to figure out how matters were coming on.

"Hurrah! he's beginning to slack up!" yelled the excited Jimmy. "We're goin' to leave the

old rascal in the lurch! Good-bye, Charlie, it's twenty-three for yours, I reckon now!"

As happened once in a while, Jimmy, when he made this boast, was counting without his host. Harry could have told him how foolish it was to figure on anything when depending on an erratic automobile engine.

The car suddenly stopped short in its mad plunge, so that the three boys in the tonneau were hurled in a heap, with sundry bruises where their bodies happened to come in violent contact with the front seats.

It seemed that the worst thing that could have come about for them must have happened, for the eccentric and tricky engine had once more given up the ghost, as if tired of fighting against the strain.

Jimmy scrambled to his knees and looked back.

"Flag him, somebody, why don't you? Look at the old rascal making for us like a tornado, sure he is! Ned, Jack, why don't you open up on him, and fill his carcass with lead? Where's that tree you wanted me to have, Ned? I'd like to climb up it right now, so I would. But here goes to give him a lead pill out of Harry's Marlin. Steady, don't knock me elbow, but watch me pink him straight in his eye. Steady it is, now!"

CHAPTER III.

OVER THE SAND BILLOWS.

Harry was working like mad, trying to make the balky engine respond to the coaxing of the crank, but with no apparent success.

Jimmy had opened fire and was working his gun with all the vim he could muster, but the car was vibrating, on account of Harry's struggling with the crank in front, that taking accurate aim was next to impossible. On this account, the bombardment from Jimmy's gun did not seem to produce results. At least, the bear came right along and exhibited increasing signs of anger, as his wounds grew in number.

Ned was quick to realize that he could never do himself justice by staying there in the wobbling car; accordingly he gave a leap that landed him alongside.

Already had the pursuing beast covered one-half of the distance heretofore separating him from those whom he recognized as mortal foes. No one could see his manner and have the faintest doubt as to his intentions, if able to come into close quarters with those human bipeds who

had invaded his haunts and mocked him with their stinging lash, which accompanied each and every loud report, thunder like.

Jack was opening now, but apparently with little better success than Jimmy, and, perhaps, from a similar reason; for Harry still kept busy with the crank, doubtless hoping that each attempt would be crowned with success.

It was apparently up to Ned, who had adopted the only wise course in quitting the body of the car, so as to get a steady aim. He was on one knee now, and aiming at the bear. There was no use in holding his fire until the animal had almost reached them, for if that first bullet failed to do the business, there must be time to follow it with a second, and even a third dose.

Ned did not tremble in the least. He had a happy faculty for holding himself in bounds when a sudden necessity arose. His chums often declared that the patrol leader was as "cool as an iceberg" in the face of danger.

When he pressed the trigger it was with more or less satisfaction that he saw the grizzly come to a stop and roll over, showing that at last a bullet had gone to a vital spot.

Still, such is the astonishing toughness of this animal that even after that he struggled once more to all fours, and started to stagger toward the boys.

Never in all his experience had Ned seen such

desperate courage and grim determination. He even felt a keen pang of regret, which sometimes assails the true sportsman, and wished that circumstances did not compel him to finish the brave old fighter; but there was no other way, since the engine refused to be good, and if the bear was allowed to advance, they would soon be engaged in a fight at close quarters with the monster.

So Ned again lowered his cheek to the stock of his faithful gun, and sent in the fatal shot that was needed to wind the career of the bear up once and for all.

Jimmy gave a whoop when he saw the beast topple over, this time to kick spasmodically and then lie still, having evidently been overtaken by death.

"You got him, Ned, sure you did!" he screeched, in his great excitement. "After all my banging away, it needed a pill from your magic gun to do for him. 'Tis a fine rug his hide'll be after makin' for the club-room of the troop up over Jack's home in little old New York. And I hope now, you wouldn't be thinkin' of scootin' off and leavin' that behind us."

"Scooting!" echoed Harry, with a harsh laugh; "I'd like to see the day come when we could do anything like that with this measly old junk box. If we keep on having all sorts of trouble with

the balky thing, I'll be white-haired long before we get to Uncle James' ranch."

They all walked back to take a look at the victim of the bombardment, and find out just how many bullets had struck home before the poor old chap had been obliged to succumb.

"Seven holes in the carcass, would you believe it?" ejaculated Jimmy, after they had made an examination; "but, all the same, that ain't goin' to ruin the pelt, I'm thinkin' The question is, who'll take it off? Jack, are you any hand at skinning a bear? Ned, how about you? I'll help all I know how, which isn't sayin' much."

While Harry continued to wrestle once more with his engine, the others set themselves to the task of removing the grizzly's hide. It turned out to be a much more difficult job than any of them had expected, and, perhaps, an expert might have had a good time laughing at the clumsy manner in which they worked; but, in the end, the job was completed, much to Jimmy's satisfaction.

"Some fine day I'll be settin' my feet on that same rug under the table in our snug club-room, away back in New York," he went on to boast, "and makin' the blood run cold in the veins of Teddy Green, Frank Shaw, Oliver Yentsch, and a lot of the other Wolves, Black Bears, Eagles, and Mooses. Now, you needn't look at me like that, Jack, and grin; because I'm a truthful

James, and I'd never try to crib the credit of killing this monster. That do belong to Ned, and him alone. So far as I could shoot, if it was left to me, we'd had to shake hands with the bear, and see how sharp our hunting knives were. Oh! listen to that, would you; Harry's been and got the old motor to runnin' again? How sweet that sound does seem. And, by the way, Ned, d'ye suppose that it'd be any use cutting off a steak or two of bear meat to try for supper?"

Ned gave him the laugh for that.

"Why," he assured the hungry scout, "you couldn't get your teeth through such tough meat if you tried for an hour. Bear steak is hard enough to masticate under any conditions, without trying a grizzly. Excuse me, Jimmy; we've got something better coming to us than fare like that."

Jimmy sighed, and gave a last rueful look at the skinless bear. Undoubtedly, it pained him to think of all that meat going to waste.

"Shall I head in toward the foot of the hills again, Ned?" asked Harry, after they had started onward once more.

"Yes, if you think the going is fairly decent," replied the patrol leader, and the chief of the present expedition.

So much time had been spent in pottering with the machine, while the skin of the bear was

being removed, that the sun was now getting pretty low in the west. It had already passed from sight behind an outlying spur of the bleak range of hills, and Jimmy after a while reminded Ned that night came fast upon the heels of the setting of the sun down in this country.

" 'Taint like up there in that Hudson Bay region," he went on to remark, "where the twilight lasted pretty much all the night. Here it's different; and they do say that down near the equator when the sun drops like a stone out of sight, it's dark before you could wink ten times."

A fairly decent camping place was soon come upon, and here they proposed to spend the coming night. Jimmy could always be depended upon to exert himself to the uttermost when there were signs of a meal in the air. He worked industriously gathering fuel for the fire, and even started the blaze himself. If the others had allowed it Jimmy stood ready to do all the cooking; but Jack and Harry seriously objected to that sort of thing.

They declared that while Jimmy could certainly cook, and do it pretty well at that, Nature had made him such a "taster" that there was small likelihood of any fair amount of the meal ever getting to the table for the rest of them. And so as a rule they made it a point for some

one else to be right on hand to assist, whenever Jimmy's turn to cook came around.

The supper was a simple one, but so long as a sufficient amount of food was served up before him, Jimmy never protested on account of simplicity. Quantity was a cardinal virtue in his eyes; so long as there was sufficient to go around several times, with a last helping for the "pot," which Jimmy usually took pity on, and devoured "to save it," as he said, he never complained.

Afterwards, they sat around taking things easy, though a little later it might have been noticed that the scouts had turned to those matters which were most pressing on their minds.

Harry was pottering again with the engine; Jack getting his camera ready, in case he found a chance to use it for a flashlight picture; Ned writing up his log of the trip, while Jimmy busied himself with the refractory mechanism of his gun, being a little bit of a mechanic in his way, it happened.

A canvas had been carried along, which could be stretched, not only over the automobile, but some distance beyond. This they could make use of as a sort of tent to shield them from the heavy dews that sometimes fell of night in this hot region, since rain was not to be looked for.

The night wore on and for some time nothing happened to cause the four young travelers any alarm. No watch was kept, because they did

not dream of such a thing as danger; as, so far as they knew, there could not be a living human being within many miles of the place where they had camped.

With the car to protect them on one side, and the canvas coming to the ground on the other, after passing over a sort of bow Ned had fashioned for this purpose, they had quite a snug retreat.

It was Jimmy who aroused them all, somewhere along in the small hours of the night, by giving vent to a series of whoops. All was dark under the canvas, and no sooner had Jimmy commenced to shout than there was a great commotion, as blankets were kicked aside and the sleepers awoke.

Ned had his useful little pocket electric light handy. This he instantly switched into service and waved around him, even while reaching out for his gun, under the impression that some brother or cousin of the dead grizzly must have visited them, and was in the act of carrying their comrade off.

Jimmy was discovered jumping up and down in a frenzied manner, and gripping the left leg of his pajamas all the while.

"What's the matter with you?" demanded Jack, who also made this discovery about the same time Ned had; "got a pain from over-eating, have you? Guess it serves you about

right, if you will hog everything? But wait till Ned gets at the medicine chest, and he'll give you a dose of camphor; that's good for the hog cholera, aint it, Ned'?"

"Pain nothin'," roared Jimmy, still dancing up and down, "don't you see how I'm grippin' my pajama leg for all I'm worth? What d'ye think I'd do that for, unless I had a poisonous thousand leg varmint gripped there, one that they call a centipede?"

"Oh! that's it, is it?" observed Harry, somewhat relieved to find that it was not the balky engine of the car that had taken a sudden notion to run all over them, as he had just been dreaming was the case. "Only a little thing like that, all this yelling! Some people make mountains out of molehills every time."

"Guess you don't know what comes if you touch one of these here centipedes when he's acrawlin' over you?" remarked the indignant Jimmy. "Why, they sink every one of them hundred feet into your flesh, and after that you're going to have a running sore that just won't heal up for a coon's age. And when I felt this critter crawlin' up inside the leg of my pajamas, I just snatched him away and I'm holdin' him right now, so he can't do any hurt. What gets me is to know how I'm going to break away. If I let loose, he'll stab me, wont he, Ned?"

"There's only one way to fix you, Jimmy," Ned told him.

"What're you getting your hunting knife for, Ned?" demanded the victim of the night attack. "I hope you don't think to try and cut him in half, while he's in my pajama leg?"

"Not at all, Jimmy," pursued the patrol leader, soberly; "but you'll have to sacrifice a piece of your garment. Later on, perhaps, you can sew it in again. Now hold hard while I draw a circle around your hand. After I've cut through, throw the piece to the ground, and I'll be ready to trample it, because I've got my shoes on. Look sharp!"

The surgical operation proved a great success. Jimmy threw the fragment that was cut from his sleeping garment on the ground and Ned trampled on it instantly, so that the centipede was quickly destroyed. Afterwards Jimmy examined the wicked looking many-footed crawler with considerable interest.

"I'd hate to feel all that double row of probes diggin' into me flesh, that I would," he declared, vehemently; "and after this it's me that means to tie a string around each ankle, before I lay me down to sleep. The feeling was enough to make a fellow's blood run cold. My tongue is sticking to the roof of me mouth, so before you turn that light out, Ned, hold steady a bit, to let me see

where the water jug is at, for I must have a drink."

There was no further alarm, for which the scouts were thankful. While they lay there, trying to get to sleep again, they heard the distant howls of wolves somewhere out on the sandy waste. Doubtless the animals had come down out of the defiles of the mountains, where they had their dens, and were roaming about in search of food. But they seemed to shun the vicinity of the scouts' camp, Jimmy declaring it to be his opinion that the rank odor of the gasoline used for fuel with the engine may have served to keep them at a distance.

In the morning, after having a hearty breakfast, which Jimmy seemed to enjoy to the utmost, they once more started in the old car. A few miles further on and Ned declared that in his opinion, if they meant to try and cross the desert in that fashion, now was their chance, when everything seemed favorable.

The water cask was replenished at a spring they had come upon, and after Ned had taken his bearings, so that they could proceed by compass, and not try to depend on their wits, he gave Harry the word.

Could those four lads have foreseen what sufferings of mind and body they were likely to endure as a result of this madcap scheme to travel from Los Angeles to the cattle ranch be-

longing to Harry's uncle, several hundred miles distant, and crossing the Mojave Desert as well as Death Valley on the way, possibly they would have changed their minds and concluded that they would be wise to attempt some other method for accomplishing their ends.

As it was, with boyish enthusiasm, such as springs from the fountain of youth, when all things look bright ahead, they turned their backs on the foothills and struck out boldly upon the seemingly endless billowy expanse of dazzling sand hills, across which there was no sign of a trail, and where many a luckless traveler had ere now left his whitened bones as the result of his termerity.

CHAPTER IV.

THE EXPECTED HAPPENS.

“What do you think about it now, Ned; can’t the old chug-wagon make the rattle?”

Jimmy asked this question some hours after they took their plunge into the wide sandy waste that went by the name of a desert. They had been pushing along all this while fairly well, though Harry spent all of his time in managing the motor, and trying to get it to behave half way decently.

Ned had his opinion of the matter, but then it was not always the best policy to be too speedy about giving the same, especially to a fellow like Jimmy, who being impetuous by nature, jumped to immediate conclusions. And on this account Ned often showed considerable caution in telling the other what he thought.

“We’ve done pretty well, so far,” he observed.

“Yes, but it’s kept poor old Harry on the jump, to climb all the funny little ridges and knolls of sand, and that’s a fact,” Jimmy went on to say. “Up to now, I never had any idea a desert could be anything but a regular flat, level

floor; that's the way most people who never saw one picture it, I reckon, don't they, Ned?"

"I know I was struck nearly dumb the first time I looked out on a real desert, and saw the queer formations which the sand makes when the wind blows like sixty," Jack broke in with.

"But if you only stopped to think a minute," Ned remarked, "you'd remember what happens when the snow is as dry as powder, and the wind whirls it every-which-way for Sunday. Don't it make all sorts of odd little hillocks and mounds, and scoop out hollows in lots of places? Well, this sand is like that dry snow, so that the wind piles it up in banks and all sorts of freaky ways. Now and then we strike a level stretch, and then it's easy going, eh, Harry?"

"Yes," replied the acting chauffeur, with a long-drawn sigh, "but the trouble in those places don't come often enough. Most of the time I'm dodging to the right, and then turning to the left, till if you could follow our tracks, you'd be apt to think two great big snakes had been wiggling along, hunting a water hole."

"Which they'd never find in this stretch of waste land," grunted Jimmy; and the very mention of the word "water" seemed to make him remember for the tenth time or more that he was thirsty, for he bent over and took a "swig" from the jug.

"But we must have covered a good many miles, all told?" suggested Jack, as he turned in his seat to look back over the trail they had made, to see the sand fairly sizzling in the tremendous heat that was poured down on it, by that blazing sun in the copper-colored sky.

"Sure we have," added Jimmy, "but tell me, do the mountains ahead seem to be any closer to us than they were an hour ago? You can search me, if I think so."

All of them stared at the dimly seen far-distant mountains, known as the Telescope Range, and which stand between the Mojave Desert and that region of dismal hunters' stories, known as Death Valley, the hottest and most desolate section of the whole United States, in all probability.

"No matter how it looks," Ned told them, seeing that the first symptom of regret was beginning to appear on Jimmy's face, "we know they must be closer, and as long as we keep up this jogging gait, we're getting nearer all the while. Everything is apt to be deceptive on a desert. Things never are what they seem. Men, who have been lost and nearly set crazy by the heat and thirst, always tell of having seen wonderful things. They, generally, take the form of gushing fountains or gurgling rivers, but even more wonderful sights than that sometimes come. One man there in Los Angeles told me

that while he lay almost dead on this very desert, he saw a city up in the sky."

"Oh! he was dreamin' when he thought he saw all that," declared the unbelieving Jimmy, with a shake of his furiously red head, to indicate that while he could accept some travelers' yarns, he would never be able to swallow such a far-fetched one as that.

"He said he was as wide-awake as ever in all his life," Ned continued, while the motor chugged away at a furious rate, in climbing a new ridge that barred their progress in heading almost due northeast.

"I know what you mean when you say that, Ned," chirped Harry, who was well up in a great many things that Jimmy did not pretend to know anything about. "It must have been what they call a mirage. I've always wanted to see for myself what that must look like. I hope we run across the conditions of atmosphere that makes such a thing possible. Why, they say in books, that travelers have seen rivers and cities that were located one or two hundred miles away."

Jimmy only puckered up his mouth and emitted a whistle. Plainly, he was not going to believe such stories as this, unless he could see the same thing with his own eyes. Jimmy could be a "doubting Thomas" when he chose, and this

happened quite frequently, it may be noted in passing.

"But ain't it hot out here, though?" Jack complained; "if we could only boom along, with something like speed, we wouldn't feel it half so much, because then, we'd be making our own breeze. As it is, there isn't a whisper in the air, and that sun must be about three hundred degrees."

"When we stopped that time for Harry to fix the motor," Jimmy remarked, "I got out to stretch my legs, but you noticed that I didn't stay long. Cause why? Let me tell you, the sand was that scorching, it just burned through the soles of my shoes, and I thought I'd skidoo while I could move a foot. Say, I bet you, a feller could fry an egg on that sand, in three shakes of a lamb's tail, it's so hot!"

"I believe you there, Jimmy," said Ned; "but there's one comfort about it,"

"Tell me about that, will you, Ned?" demanded the other. "I like to be cheered up a little right now, sure I would."

"Well, if we should find it necessary to camp out to-night on the desert, we can start in early, and cook a meal, without bothering about a fire," the patrol leader explained, with a broad smile on his face.

"But we haven't got any eggs along," returned Jimmy, quickly, "and that lets me out,

because you can't prove I stretched it any. Only I hope we won't have to pass a night on this blooming old desert. You don't reckon on doing the same, Ned, tell me?"

"You never can tell what will happen," was all the consolation he received; "and it's just as well to figure on the worst that could come along; then you're agreeably disappointed if it doesn't turn out that way."

"You're right there, Ned," observed Harry, at this juncture, "anything is liable to happen when you're driving an old wheezer like this through deep sand most of the time. Hear her puff, would you? It was about all she could do to make that ridge. One of these times, the rest of you may have to get out and walk, so as to make it easier for the balky machine. Somebody please take my bandana and wipe my streaming forehead, will you? I can't take either hand away from the driving wheel, when she acts as cranky as she does. If I did, I honestly believe she'd buck, throw us all out, kick up her heels, and go spinning away, snorting with delight at marooning the lot of us out here on the desert. Thank you, Ned; do as much for you when you need it."

"Can I spell you, Harry?" asked the patrol leader, anxiously, for he saw that the other scout was showing signs of being pretty nearly ex-

hausted, from the hard work and the heated condition of his blood combined.

"Not just yet," replied Harry, as cheerily as possible. "When I get to the 'all-in' point, I'll go you on that offer, Ned. It's a long cry yet to sun-down, and I reckon I'll be glad to let you take a hand, later on."

"Whew! it's only high noon right now," Jimmy informed them, looking out from under the top of the car, to note the position of the sun; for like a true scout, he seldom had any need of a watch, having learned half a dozen ways of telling the time of day.

"That would mean five hours more of this sort of thing before we quit," Jack figured, pensively, as though wondering how on earth they could stand being cooked and baked and stewed and fried that long, without giving up the ghost.

"There's a picture for you to take, Jack," said Ned, a few minutes afterwards, as he pointed ahead; "see where the sand has been blown away from that rack of bones, that glisten as white as chalk in the sun."

"Ugh!" cried Jimmy, shuddering, "do you think they belonged to some poor prospector that must have been caught out here in a sand storm?"

"Probably they *did* belong to a prospector," Ned went on to say, and quickly adding: "but they formed a part of his donkey; because you

can see that it was an animal of some sort that perished here. Suppose you halt the machine, Harry, and let's all get out, to give Jack a chance to take a decent picture, with the auto for a background, and the desert stretching away off."

Harry was only too willing to accede to this request. It would give both himself and the hard-worked machine a chance to rest up and cool off.

"In this glaring sunlight, I have to use the smallest stop I've got, and work the shutter like lightning," Jack informed them. "There, range up on that side, all of you. It's going to make a jim dandy picture, believe me; that is, if Jimmy 'll only quit making faces, and look sober."

"I'd like to, mighty well," spoke up the object of this cutting remark; "but when blisters are comin' on your soles from this fire sand, it ain't the easiest thing agoin' to stand still, let alone look pleasant. Hurry up, Jack, or I'll be frizzled and frazzled to beat the band. Sing out when you're ready, and I'll get a wide grin on, if it kills me."

The agony was soon over, and it was ludicrous to see how the boys hurried for the shelter of the standing car. Even that leather roof afforded some grateful relief from the furious rays of the sun, which beat down from an unclouded sky, almost directly upon their heads.

It took Harry quite some time to coax the unwilling motor to start up again.

"That holding up is a bad business, and we mustn't try it again in a hurry," he observed, as he stopped to wipe his face before working again with the obstinate crank, which somehow failed to induce the engine to commence operations.

The next time won out, for immediately their anxious ears were gladdened with the clatter of the motor, as it took up its weary theme. After Harry once more got in his seat he had it purring away as cheerily as one could wish.

"Shucks! that gave me a scare, fellers," Jimmy frankly admitted. "I was trying to figure how long we could stand it, if we had to walk all the way across this wide stretch of burning sand. Tell me about the three men they put in the fiery furnace long ago, and who came out O K in the end; it couldn't have been much worse than we're feeling right now. I'm nearly cooked all the way through."

As they kept moving on, following a generally eastward route, as well as the singular conformation of those sandy hills would let them, the boys relapsed into a period of silence. Every fellow was possibly busy with his own thoughts; or else it might be dozing with the heat.

Ned every now and then took an observation. He had passed through some strange scenes in his young life, but never anything like this.

For a long time some of the scouts had declared that they were yearning to see for themselves what such a waste land was really like; but the chances were this desire would be fully satisfied on this trip, and they would have enough of deserts to last a lifetime.

In every direction all Ned could see was that everlasting sand, glistening in the sun's rays, until it seemed to make the very air hazy, and vibrating with the intense reflected heat. Far off, one could just barely discern the dim outlines of the mountain range; but they knew that this would afford little or no relief from the dreadful monotony, since few trees grew there; while beyond lay Death Valley, which these adventurous boys had planned to cross, because the ranch of Harry's uncle lay in a direct line to the east of the famous valley.

Up in the brazen heavens Ned's eye was attracted by a few moving specks. He watched these curiously, and could easily guess that they must be buzzards wheeling and counter wheeling over some spot where carrion awaited their pleasure.

Not another thing that had life in it could he see, looking in every direction. At this time of the day, apparently, a wolf or a coyote had more sense than to attempt to cross the burning sands; that sort of foolishness, Ned reflected, was left to boys who seldom knew when they were well

off, but must needs roam about, seeking new fields of adventure and excitement.

Well, there was certainly little of the latter connected with this trip, so far. The monotony was simply dreadful, and there were times when one felt almost like shouting at the top of his voice, just from pent-up nervousness. Always must they worry over the conduct of that motor; right now, he could see that Harry was frowning as he listened to the complaints of the engine, which his experienced ear detected readily enough, although they might not be audible to others.

To himself Ned was saying the chances were about three against one that it would turn out as they had originally planned. He believed that they were almost due for a fall; and was already steeling himself against a shock. That was Ned's way, and no doubt as he sat there, instead of simply dozing as Jimmy and Jack appeared to be doing, he was mentally counting the cost of their hardihood in risking this terrible trip across the desert, in case anything should happen to make them abandon the automobile and strike out afoot for their distant destination.

Suddenly the car came to a stop. The motor seemed to give a groan, as though it had struck for good, and would refuse to budge another foot.

Jimmy was almost thrown over the back of the front seat, and it was a rude awakening for him.

Harry was out in a twinkling, and had thrown back the metal hood, though he gave a cry of pain on doing so, for it must have been furiously hot from the sun's ray without and the laboring engine within.

"What's the word, Harry?" asked Jack, looking alarmed, when he saw that the acting chauffeur had apparently thrown up his hands in rank despair.

"We're in the soup for fair this time, fellows!" came the reply.

"Busted for keeps is she, Harry?" gasped Jimmy, looking horrified.

"The work was too much for the engine, and she broke down completely, so that repairs could only be made in a garage, or a blacksmith shop," was the distressing announcement.

CHAPTER V.

TROUBLES NEVER COME SINGLY.

Jimmy was always something of a surprise. When things were going on fairly well, he might often be heard to grumble and complain; but, once let disaster stare them in the face, the boy with the carrotty red hair and freckled face could meet it bravely and without flinching.

So now, when Harry made that doleful announcement which, of course, sent a shudder through them all, despite the heat they were enduring at the time, it was Jimmy who first gave voice to words of encouragement.

" 'Tis a pity the old wheezer didn't give out before we started, so as to make us take to bronchos," he said; "but now that we know the worst, that load's off our mind, so it is. If we've got to walk across the desert, what's to hinder our stayin' right here, takin' things easy till that blisterin' sun drops out of sight, and then doin' our walkin' by starlight. I'll agree to pack the water keg, if you say the word."

Ned was quick to take up the challenge.

"A fine idea that of yours, Jimmy," he imme-

diately declared, "and we'll hold you to your promise yet, see if we don't, with Jack standing guard over you with his gun ready to make sure you don't suck the keg dry when on the march. But Harry, are you *sure* the motor is gone beyond repair? I'm a little of a mechanic, and you know something more about machinery; couldn't the two of us, by working off and on, get things moving again?"

Harry shook his head in the negative.

"You know I'm the last one to throw up the sponge and quit, Ned, as long as I can see a fighting chance," he assured the other; "but it's hopeless. I discovered a flaw in that part awhile back, and could have kicked myself for overlooking it in the start, when we bought the old machine off that man in the city. Well, all this while it's managed to hold out, but it must have had a bad jump when we struck this lot of holes that did the business. I tell you, she'll never chirp again until she pays a visit to a repair shop, and you get an entirely new piece."

He even took the trouble to show them the broken part of the motor, though Jimmy, being utterly ignorant of such matters, could only see that something had gone wrong, and was satisfied to take Harry's word for it that until this could be duplicated the auto was utterly useless.

"Then it means walk for us, don't it?" Jack asked.

"No question about it now," he was informed by Ned.

"Oh! for a blacksmith shop! My kingdom for a garage!" cried Jimmy, pretending to be looking all around in the hopes of seeing a friendly sign swinging in the breeze—only it happened that there was not a breath of air stirring any more than that a repair shop was to be found in the heart of the Mojave Desert, awaiting customers.

"How do you feel about going back?" asked Ned, in order to discover whether the indomitable natures of his chums still held good, though he was ready to agree to whatever the majority decided was best.

The other three looked at each other curiously.

"Nixey, for me," Jimmy finally announced. "We must be mighty near half-way between the mountains ahead and the hills we quitted. That bein' the case, we wouldn't gain much by turnin' tail and ownin' up to bein' beat."

"That just about expresses my feelings," admitted Jack. "We've gone through lots of tough pinches before now, and always managed to come out right side up with care, and I guess, we can do it again, eh, Harry?"

"Oh! whatever the rest of you say, I'm agreeable to," answered the boy, whose hobby lay in the line of history and geography, but who could put his hand to nearly anything that came along,

from running a motor, to erecting a wireless plant, given a fair amount of necessary material.

"Then that's settled, once and for all," Ned announced. "We'll push on, when we do make a start, and try to reach that range of hills we can just see through the quivering heat."

"Scouts never turn back!" declared Jimmy, boastfully, "as long as they can wet their whistle every once in so often with the joyful water. Pass me that jug, won't you please, Jack. I believe, I'm feeling some dry again, and I never can talk halfway decent when my tongue wants to stick to the roof of my mouth."

Jack seemed in no hurry to oblige him.

"I don't know about that, Jimmy," he went on to say; "seems to me you're getting more than your share of the water, with that dry throat of yours. Take some chewing gum, and keep your jaws busy for a while. Nothing like it to induce the saliva to moving, and lubricate things. It saves water, too, let me tell you."

"Aw! go on and oblige me, Jack. Sure, with that big keg filled to the brim, we've got plenty of juice to last us out three times over. I only want to wet my old throat a bit, that's all."

"I've been thinking that it's only a habit with you, Jimmy," Jack argued, though really beginning to stoop down so as to get at the water jug. "If you could keep forgetting that you were thirsty, you'd go as long between drinks as we

do. And let me tell you, it's an awful habit to let grow on you, especially in such a dry country as this. You'll be having a water jag on if you keep it up."

It was amusing to see how Jack, first of all, took a pretty good drink himself before passing the jug along, grinning at Jimmy the while.

"Better have swig, Ned, and you, too, Harry," he said, after satisfying his own thirst, "because once Jimmy gets his turn and he's apt to drain the jug to the bottom."

It was speaking well for the cheery natures of these lads that they could joke and make merry, even when facing such a dismal outlook as confronted them now.

"There's one thing that we neglected to bring along," Jimmy gravely announced, while waiting for his turn to come at the water jug.

"What's that?" asked Jack, who had finished drinking, and was evidently feeling very much refreshed.

"An aeroplane!" announced Jimmy, triumphantly. "Every bunch of scouts going into the desert ought to be put wise to the necessity of having a flying machine along. Think what a grand thing the same'd be to us right now. Would we be worrin' our heads about the long and arduous tramp that's before us? Not on your tin-type, we wouldn't. S'posin' the old auto does go to smash, all you'd have to do would

be to put your plane together, climb in, and go sailin' off like a thistle-down, wherever you felt like it. Oh! but it was a silly lot we were not to have a stock of aeroplanes aboard. And say, once you climbed up half a mile or so, and the sun wouldn't feel hot a single bit, for it's the reflection that makes it that way here on this sand."

Jimmy always had a mixture of nonsense and philosophy on tap. The others were accustomed to listening to him, with a mingling of amusement and speculation. Sometimes he did advance ideas in a crude state that were worth considering, though just then they understood he was, of course, joking.

"Well, next time we start to cross a desert, consider yourself deputized to supply a monoplane for every member of the expedition, Jimmy," said Ned. "I can just shut my eyes and imagine the lot of us soaring up like a flock of birds. But all the same, it would be a splendid idea, if only it could be done. I should think that anybody who owned a flying machine wouldn't be silly enough to try and cross a desert in a ramshackle automobile, like some people I happen to know."

"Don't rub it in, Ned," pleaded Harry; "I'm feeling bad enough about it without that. Of course, it's mostly my fault, for not having known better. And I didn't examine the ma-

chine as I should have done before we concluded it would answer our purpose. It hurts me to think what a dreadful mess I've gone and got you all in, and I only wish I could think up some way to soften things a little."

"That'll do for you, Harry," exclaimed Jimmy, quickly. "We don't mean to stand by and hear you trying to take the whole blame on your shoulders. I feel pretty punk myself, because I kept my eyes shut, and knew all the time the old thing was on the blink. We swim or sink together, and no one is going to crawl out from taking his share of the blame. But it's all right, and what do we care for the machine anyhow. Once we get to the railroad on the other side of Death Valley, and what's to hinder us from making the mines up at Bullfrog, Gold Center, and the other places, where a fork in the railroad would take us within twenty miles of Harry's uncle's ranch?"

"Jimmy's got it all laid out like a map," chuckled Harry, stopping from drinking to nod his head in commendation of the scheme which Jimmy was laying out so plausibly; "and it sounds good to me, that's right."

"Hold on there, don't go to giving me any credit for thinkin' up schemes," remonstrated Jimmy, hurriedly, turning red in the face with confusion; "I'm only like a parrot, and repeating what I've heard Ned say more'n once, when

he was examin' his chart of this country. Any left for me, Harry?" as the water jug was finally passed along by the one who had last been served.

Jimmy tilted it caressingly on his crooked left arm, and winked several times at his chums, as he proceeded to take the dryness out of his throat. When the operation had been duly completed he seemed to be feeling considerably better.

"That sure beats any strong drink that ever was made up," he remarked, smacking his lips, "though I own that it'd taste a whole lot better if it was cold from the spring, instead of only luke-warm. But you'd have to have a thermos bottle to keep water cool in this climate, where they never see ice. That's another thing we'll fetch along with us next time, boys; a stock of bottles warranted to keep things hot or cold, just as you want."

"If Jimmy had his way about it, backed by the treasury of the troop," Ned ventured to say, "you'd need a wagon-train to carry all the contraptions he could lay out on his list of necessities. I used to pile up a schedule as long as your arm every time I figured on going into the woods; but an old hunter showed me that I could really do without four-fifths of the lot, and even then never find use for some of those I took along."

"Well," Jimmy asserted stubbornly, "them aeroplanes'd come in mighty handy right now,

you all admit that much, and an ice cold drink—say, let's talk about something else, or I'll be thinking I'm sitting at the drug-store counter again, orderin' an ice-cream soda in a glass a foot high."

He held the jug in his lap while speaking, as though some half-formed idea had come into his head, which presently he would expect to put into execution.

"Five hours of this lounging ought to rest us up some," Harry observed, as he rubbed his arms where the greatest strain of driving the car over such a difficult trail must have settled.

"And you know it gets cool in the night right here on the desert, after the heat has had a chance to leave the sand. They say that often you'd need a blanket before morning, where in the middle of the day it's unbearable," Ned told them, naturally wishing to find all the consolation possible in the prospect that stared them in the face, and which was not very pleasant, even when taken at its best.

"We've got the blankets all right this time, though I can remember a certain occasion when our canoes were stolen, up there on Hudson Bay, and we felt the need of such things more than a little."

It was Jack who made this remark, and both Jimmy and Ned nodded their heads, for they had vivid recollections of the discomforts that

had come to them on that occasion. As Harry had not been along, of course, he did not have any memories to revive, one way or another, though he had heard the story of their adventures up in the Far North, told at various meetings of the troop in their New York club-room, and could therefore appreciate what Jack meant.

"Hold on there, Jimmy, please don't swallow the jug; we may need that for a while longer, the way things look!" Harry exclaimed, when he saw the scout with the red hair and freckled face once more elevating the stone receptacle for holding drinking water, and throw his head well back as if for a supreme effort.

Jimmy had to laugh at that, and of course desisted in his labor.

"Oh! shucks! can't a feller just tickle his parched throat with the last few drops in the old jug, but you have to go and poke all manner of fun at him? Thought as it was about empty, I'd better tap the main reservoir, so we wouldn't be called on to go to any particular bother whenever we wanted just a mite of a thirst-quencher. Never mind coming around with me, Harry; I c'n fill her up without any help, even if this is the first time we've had to replenish our supply since leaving that bully cool spring."

"Be mighty careful to see that the plug's in tight when you finish, Jimmy," Ned warned him.

"I should say so," added Jack, looking as though he did not believe careless Jimmy could be fully trusted to complete the task all by himself, and perhaps, secretly resolved to afterwards stroll around to the rear of the automobile, where the water tank was roped on, in order to make sure things were all right.

Jimmy was feeling pretty good, after taking aboard all that fluid. He commenced to troll a ditty in his humorous fashion as, swinging the empty jug over his shoulder, he passed from their sight.

The other boys were starting to talk about something else, when all at once Ned noticed that Jimmy had stopped singing, and so very suddenly that there was something suspicious about the circumstance.

Although Ned did not say a word to alarm his other chums, he was listening with his heart, figurately speaking, in his throat, fearful that the list of their disasters might not yet be complete.

Sure enough, he quickly heard Jimmy coming. The smaller scout was tearing around the side of the car, just as though he might have seen a banshee, or glimpsed the magical sky city of which they had recently been speaking.

His face was as white as a sheet, and because of the myriad of freckles looked very comical; but no one laughed, for they realized that some-

thing terrible must have happened to cause bold Jimmy to have such a pinched and frightened appearance.

"What's happened, Jimmy?" asked Ned, trying to keep his voice steady, though it would persist in wavering more or less in spite of his efforts.

"It's all gone!" gasped Jimmy, holding up his hands, as though in that way he could measure the depths of despair that racked his soul.

"Not—the—water?" almost shrieked Harry.

"Yes—plug wasn't in tight, and it's been leaking right along!" Jimmy bellowed.

CHAPTER VI.

A TERRIBLE PROSPECT AHEAD.

"Don't believe him, boys; he's only trying to see if he can give us a scare!" declared Jack, incredulously.

Jimmy drew in a long breath as he turned on the speaker indignantly, saying:

"Do I look like I'm joshing? Can't you see that I'm trembling all over, because it seems like we might be up against a whole peck of trouble? I tell you, I found the plug loose, and the water dribbling away like fun, just trickling over the hot sand, like it wanted to try and sprinkle the whole desert. Oh! what a shame to have such lovely water go to waste."

"See here, let's investigate the thing for ourselves!" cried Harry.

"That's the best way," Ned added.

With that all of them hurried around the stalled car. The water keg had been securely strapped to the rear, in such a position that when they felt it necessary to refill the jug from which they drank, it could be easily done with-

out disturbing the vessel that contained the main supply.

This keg could be filled through the bunghole, and there was a plug, by means of which water could be drawn off. Harry immediately glued his eye to the larger opening; then he tried to shake the keg, but apparently failed to discover what he wanted to know.

"Let me try," said Ned, who had picked up a slender stick, which he must have previously fastened there for the purpose of probing the contents of the keg.

This he thrust in through the open bunghole, and carefully pushed downward until it rested on the bottom. Then, withdrawing the measuring wand, he examined the end, readily noticing how far up it seemed to be wet.

"Just two inches of water in the keg!" Jack gasped, horror in his whole manner.

The scouts looked at each other for nearly a full minute in absolute silence. No doubt a great many terrible things flashed through their active young minds in that short space of time. Still, with the hopefulness of youth, they quickly recovered a fair measure of confidence.

"Not even half a jug of water to last us out, is there?" Harry remarked, with a rueful face.

"About two decent drinks all around, that's all!" Jimmy announced, as though that about covered the whole ground; "why, I'd calculated

on absorbing twice that much myself before sundown. Gee! but we're up against it for keeps now, fellers."

They all realized that what he said was strictly true. The immediate future that stared them in the face was about as serious a problem as any they had ever hopefully tackled.

Jimmy went and brought the jug around, and then they carefully drained the treacherous keg to the last drop, careful not to spill the least bit.

When this operation had been completed, just as Harry had observed, the jug was not more than half full. With the heat so intense, and constantly tempting them to slake their thirst, that supply would quickly run out.

What was to happen then they did not like to contemplate. Scouts might know considerable in the way of woodcraft, and all such things, but this knowledge would not help them one bit to locate a well or a water-hole on that wide stretch of sizzling sand.

"How d'ye suppose it happened, anyhow?" Harry wanted to know.

Jimmy and Jack exchanged suspicious glances, as though each imagined the other believed him the guilty one.

"Oh! I know you all believe I must a been tampering with the plug, just because I was always feeling so awful dry," Jimmy spoke up; "but 'taint so. Cross my heart if I even so

much as put a finger on the old keg after we set her here, and Ned, he tightened the rope and strap so she couldn't joggle too much."

"And Jimmy here has got a sneaking notion in his head that, perhaps, I fooled with the plug that time I came around to get the monkey-wrench Harry said he dropped when he was opening the toolbox, and we were slowing up," Jack went on to remark; "but I tell you, I never gave the keg even a single look. Wish now I had, because then I might have noticed it dripping, and that would have saved a lot of the precious water."

"All of us helped carry the keg from the spring, and the rest of you stood by when I roped it in place," said Ned, positively; "so you'll bear me witness that at that time it wasn't leaking a drop."

"Yes, that's a dead sure thing, Ned," Jack volunteered, with vehemence.

"Then there's only one thing to say," Harry declared; "the jostling of the old car must have gradually loosened the plug. It didn't fall out, but allowed water to ooze away. When that was going on for some hours, it's easy to see what happened. But we never were great hands to cry over spilt milk, fellows."

"Good for you, Harry!" remarked Ned approvingly, for above all things he knew he must not let his mates fall into a panic, if it could be

avoided; because so long as they could keep their heads clear, they would have a chance to win out; but once let them become confused, and the difficulties were doubled.

"We've run against tough deals lots of other times," Jack added, hopefully, "yes, and come out right-side up with care, too. We'll do the same here, make up your minds. A little thing like this oughtn't to make us show the white flag."

"First of all, let's get back under that canopy and talk things over," Ned told them. "This new happening may make some change necessary in our programme."

"What do you mean by that, Ned?" demanded Jack, after they had once more settled down under the grateful shade of the auto cover.

"Well, you know we had figured it out that we'd stay here till night came, and it would be easier traveling by starlight than under the hot sun," the patrol leader explained. "The question now is, whether that would be the best course for us to pursue."

"You mean that since our water supply is nearly exhausted we'd better be striking out for the mountains ahead there; is that it, Ned?" asked Harry.

Ned nodded his head in the affirmative. He realized the gravity of their situation, and, yet at the same time, had already determined that

it was up to him to try and make as light of it as possible, so as to encourage his chums. On this account, then, he smiled as he thus answered Harry's query:

"Let's look at the thing straight in the face," Jack suggested. "If we stay here, chances are we'll sip every drop of that scanty supply away before night comes on, and not be a single step nearer a water-hole than now. On the other hand, if we begin to hike out, while we wouldn't have any more water at sundown, we ought to be some miles on our way. Then when the cooler night air refreshes us we could take up the tramp, and perhaps, get somewhere before the sun began to scorch things again. How's that strike you, fellows?"

"Sounds as though you were in favor of going on," remarked Ned.

"I am," came the quick reply.

"How about you, Harry?" asked the leader.

"Count me the same as Jack," was the response he met with.

"Jimmy, have you made up your mind about which way looks good to you?" continued Ned, determined that no matter what came they should not have any chance to say there had not been a free expression of opinion.

"Let's be on the move," Jimmy pleaded. "Sure every step we take fetches the blessed water nearer, so it does. And I tell you, I'd go

out of me head just to sit and sit and do nothing all this afternoon, while me throat kept on getting dryer and dryer. Count me for skipping out, Ned."

"Well, that settles it, and we'll get ready to desert the auto some six hours sooner than we figured on," Ned announced, resolutely.

"But you haven't said what you think, Ned?" objected Jack.

"It wouldn't matter," replied the other, hastily. "We go by majority rule in all cases like this, and three have already spoken for cutting loose. To tell you the truth, it's six of one and half a dozen of the other with me. Both plans have good and bad features about them. And I'm perfectly willing to strike out, though we must keep our heads about us, so as to make no mistakes."

"What will we take along with us besides our rifles?" inquired Harry.

"A blanket apiece, so long as we can carry them," replied Ned.

"Of course the water jug," added Jimmy.

"I'll look out for that," observed Jack, calmly; and, if there was a grain of suspicion in his voice, aimed at Jimmy, the latter did not seem in a humor to feel aggrieved.

"I'm meaning to see if I can pack the cover of the car along with me," Ned announced, "that is, if it can be removed in whole, and

doesn't turn out to be too heavy. It would be a prime shelter from the sun, if we found ourselves knocked out and had to stop to rest. But, if after the first half-hour it gets to be too much of a load, you'll see me throw it aside in a big hurry."

They worked along in silence for a short time.

"Ready?" asked Ned, seeing that the others acted as though through with their several labors.

All of them declared that they knew of nothing else to be done. So the word was given to commence the terrible hike that stared them in the face.

They all disliked leaving the car, but since it had broken down and could be of no more possible use to them, it must be left behind, to take its place among the many strange derelicts the desert claimed as its portion.

Before long the scouts were wilting under the fierce rays of the sun that seemed to beat down on them with a fury they had never before in all their lives experienced. No one complained as yet, though it required considerable grit to refrain, when the conditions were so uncomfortable.

Ned called a halt, so they could wipe their streaming faces and get a brief respite; but it seemed even hotter standing still than moving, and Jimmy soon requested that the order be given for a further advance.

"Ain't this the queerest you ever saw?" he

asked, when another hour had crept by, and they halted again, this time because almost exhausted; "we've come more'n a few miles, that's right, and yet it seems to me the mountains do be as far away as ever they were, and then some. I wonder now if they could be bewitched, and able to change their bases, so as to keep just so far away? Things are all twisted up in this funny country, and when they come to calling it the Skeleton Range, I do be thinkin' there's something of the ghost order about it. You needn't laugh, Harry, because you'll be sayin' the same before we're out of this scrape."

Harry apparently did not have the heart to muster even the shadow of a laugh; he was feeling too serious just then to see anything humorous about Jimmy's belief in phantoms, and all such ridiculous things.

"That is undoubtedly caused by a peculiar condition of the atmosphere," explained Ned. "I've heard that it always happens in desert places. Travelers of experience never try to figure out distances by what they see. They base all their calculations on their knowledge and the map they carry."

Jimmy sighed.

"I wish I had that confidence, that's all I can say," he told Ned, his utterance being thick and unnatural, simply because they had allowed him only one good turn at the water jug since

leaving the stalled car, and his throat was as dry as it could possibly be.

Presently another start was made, though there was more or less groaning among the boys when they put one leg in front of the other. It began to seem as though each foot weighed half a ton, and even the rifles felt unusually heavy, not to mention the other things with which they were loaded.

They managed to keep the blankets with them for the balance of that dreadful day; but Ned foresaw that if fate decided that they were still on the desert when the sun arose again, the chances were they would have to throw everything aside and tramp steadily ahead, the one important object being water.

Jimmy sometime later began to cast anxious looks in the direction of Jack, who bore the almost empty water jug. His eyes were becoming bloodshot, and his whole appearance suggested the utmost misery, though by shutting his lips tightly together, he managed to keep back the groan that tried to force its way out.

They no longer talked, because that required more or less effort, and every bit of energy must be devoted to the task of covering rods of burning sand that fairly blistered the feet of the pilgrims through the soles of their shoes.

As they thus toiled along in any sort of way, sometimes one in advance, and then another,

they presented a forlorn appearance, indeed. Jack realized that it would make a picture worth seeing, but, somehow, he failed to have the ambition to snap it off. All he could think of then was cooling streams, where he had many a time sat under the shade of an elm and fished, or else plunged into from a diving spring-board. He imagined he could hear the jolly tinkle and splash of the fountain in the old New England town he used to visit each summer during vacations, before he joined the scouts and took to camping out with them.

All at once Jimmy made a strange sound. Perhaps he meant it to be a whoop; but on account of the extreme dryness of his throat, he could not do himself justice.

"There, I told you it was all a delusion and a snare, so I did!" he exclaimed, thickly.

"What was?" asked Harry, startled.

"That old Skeleton Mountain Range we've been aimin' to reach this whole afternoon, that's what," replied the other, with a forlorn look on his now very red face, and a shrug of his shoulders.

"Why, what makes you say that?" continued Harry.

"Can't you see for yourself that it's disappeared entirely?" demanded Jimmy. "The nearer you get to them mountains, the further you are away. A little while back I said they

was lookin' dimmer than ever, and now my eyes must be on the blink, for sure, I can't see the first sign of the same, nothin' but yellow atmosphere!"

Jack turned to the patrol leader, for somehow he seemed to believe that Ned was able to explain the strange happening.

"What does it mean, Ned?" he asked anxiously; "I reckon you know, and it aint anything pleasant either. Tell us the worst, Ned; we'll try and stand it!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE SAND STORM.

Jack, Harry and Jimmy had their eyes glued upon the face of the patrol leader, while waiting for him to speak in answer to the anxious question the first named scout had put up to him.

"Of course, I don't know for certain, fellows," replied the other, hastily, "but unless I'm a whole lot mistaken, we're up against another nasty experience."

"As what?" questioned Jimmy.

"I think that is what they call a sand-storm bearing down this way," was the answer he received, as Ned pointed away in the direction they had been heading.

"You make me feel like thirty cents when you say that, Ned," Jimmy cried, thickly, "after hearing all that old prospector told us about how he suffered the worst he knew in all his life, in a sand-storm on this same desert."

"And none of us thought it could be great shakes then," said Harry, "but, let me tell you, things look different when your're on the ground, and nearly par-boiled and baked in the bargain.

But what can we do, Ned? Must we just stay here and stand for it?"

"No, let's get busy, and have this auto top raised," the leader advised. "With out blankets, perhaps, it'll shield us some from the flying sand, which they say cuts like sleet does and stings like anything. Then, if we have time, we'll bind our bandanas over our faces, like the Arabs do off there in Africa and Egypt when a sand-storm overtakes them on the desert."

"Everybody get busy!" sang out Jimmy, trying to show a cheerfulness he certainly did not feel below the surface.

They worked with a vim. Indeed, with that grim visitor bearing swiftly down upon them, loitering was quite out of the question.

The auto top, which Ned had actually packed along with him through all that dreadful heat was arranged so that it made quite a little tent, being fastened down on the side from which the wind was coming; though with the air full of shifting fine sand, that would be like powder, it was bound to penetrate despite their utmost precautions.

Already they could taste it in the air. It passed up their nostrils and affected them in such a way that it would be a wonder if each did not presently suffer with a blinding headache.

Ned showed them what he meant by saying they could make good use of their large, red

bandana handkerchiefs to wrap up their heads, so as to conceal mouth, nose and eyes, and yet breathe at the same time. The cloth would serve to filter the air, after a fashion, and at least afford some relief.

Hardly had these preparations been hurried through with than the storm broke around the four boys.

There was an absence of howling winds, because no obstructions could possibly get in the way; but a peculiar dull roaring sound kept rising and falling, while the air became so thick with the agitated dust that it would have been utterly impossible for any one to have seen ten feet away, even with the best of eyes.

All they could do was to crouch there and try to draw their breath, satisfied to simply stay alive. There was little likelihood that any one of those four lads would ever forget the experience as long as they lived. Such things are apt to make an impression on the mind that time can never efface.

How the minutes dragged away on leaden wings. It seemed to Jimmy that he must have been ages in that uncomfortable position, and that there was a fine chance of his turning into a petrified mummy forthwith, if it continued much longer; yet he dared not try to make a change, for he believed that once he lifted his

head and made an opening for the sand to blow in, it would overwhelm him.

Ned, however, was on the watch. He had managed it so that whenever he chose he could take an observation, though no matter which way he looked it was just the same, with that yellow cloud hanging over them, blotting out even the copper-colored sky, and the sun that was probably still shining remorselessly above the agitated desert.

Jack and Harry moved restlessly every once in so often. Perhaps they were so near choking with the dust and the terrible heat that they felt a change was necessary, in order to break the dreadful monotony.

Talking was, of course, utterly out of the question. Even had they possessed plenty of water with which to moisten their parched throats, it must have been the height of folly for them to keep their mouths open, since the air was so charged with fine dust that it would choke them.

No one could even guess how long the sand-storm would last, because they had no experience to guide them. What concerned them most of all was whether their endurance would carry them through successfully or not.

The prospect was disheartening, to say the least. Even though they managed to survive the mad whirl of shifting sand, and the wind

went down as the day drew near its close, what had they to look forward to? Miles upon miles separated them from safety, and it must be a serious question whether they could stand the long tramp that would be required in order that they reach the uplifts to the east.

What then? Skeleton Range sounded ominous, although hitherto they had not bothered themselves with any speculations as how it came by such a gruesome name. It was a part of the Telescope Mountains, they knew, and must have some ghastly history back of it, to account for propsectors calling it such.

It gave Ned a bad feeling when several times he felt sure he heard Jimmy calling out in a half-frenzied way the magical word, "water! water!"

"Perhaps, the poor fellow is seeing running streams in his delirium?" Ned told himself, and he only wished he could do something to buoy up the spirits of his three chums.

His own condition was almost forgotten in thinking about how his comrades must be suffering in the midst of this strange and terrible experience. That is the way with a true-hearted scout and chum, always trying to consider others before himself. Ned had gained the sincere regard of every member of the troop, through just such unselfish acts as this, and it was no wonder they had elected him to serve as the assistant scout master, when there was a need for such an

officer, and only a first-class scout could apply to Headquarters in New York City, in order to discharge the duties connected with the responsible office.

In vain did he rack his poor brain in the endeavor to think up some means for, at least, allaying the torture which he knew his friends must be enduring. What he had ever read about desert experiences and sand-storms came back to him; but, after all was said and done, he realized that the Arabs and Bedouins of the desert knew of nothing else to do but submissively bow their heads to the will of Allah, and wait until the wind had ceased to whirl the fine powdery sand around in maddening eddies. If it were written that they should find their tombs underneath the mounds that were being piled up, that was the decree of Fate, and no effort on their part would change it one iota.

Jack was a boy with a tremendous amount of will-power, once he chose to exert it. He made up his mind that he would not give way to his feelings and allow a single sound to escape from his lips, no matter how he suffered while cowering there under the shelter.

Compressing his lips tightly he tried to breathe the best he could and think of pleasant things in the past to give him courage. Naturally enough these took the shape of water scenes. He could call them up in his mind and once again

feast his eyes on the glorious waves that came rolling in when up on some large Maine lake with his father, fishing for trout or bass. And fine though the picture may have looked at the time, it was three times as beautiful when Jack summoned it to mind while fighting against the choking influence of that penetrating sifting sand.

He began to fear that they would never come out of this scrape alive. Perhaps the desert would swallow them up as it had scores of other unfortunates in the past. The prowling wolves that had their dens in the rocky arroyos of the mountain ranges, and came down to the level country of nights in search of food, would scent them out, and leave nothing but whitened bones to tell the terrible story of their fate.

No wonder Jack shivered at the idea, even though at the same time his flesh was burning with the heat and the irritation caused by the sand that worked under his clothes.

He, too, heard poor Jimmy calling half distractedly for water, and the sound had given him a bad feeling, for all of them were exceedingly fond of the jolly, good-hearted Bowery lad, who never counted the cost when he could do something for his chums.

When therefore Jack suddenly became conscious of the fact that some one seemed to be trying to shout, his first thought was that Jim-

my must have actually gone out of his mind, and was singing in his delirium.

Then a hand gripped him by the shoulder, and from the tug he received Jack realized that it was intended he should make a move to throw off the cover he had drawn as tightly about his head as possible.

When he looked up he found that it was Ned who had been the cause of this commotion, and that he seemed to be more or less excited. Whether this sprang from good news or bad Jack was unable to say on the spur of the moment, though his heart seemed to turn cold as though an icy hand had been laid upon it, at the prospect of new difficulties confronting them.

"Get up on your knees and crawl out here!" Ned was saying; "give the others the word too. Don't you see the storm's nearly past, for the sand is leaving the air up above. You can even get snatches of the sun over there, which must be in the west. And in half an hour more night can be looked for!"

That was good news indeed! Harry and Jimmy had raised their heads in time to overhear what Ned said. They made no audible comment, because both of them seemed to have completely lost their voices for the time being, having failed to follow the example set by Ned, who chewed gum all the time, and in this way

managed to keep his throat fairly well lubricated with saliva.

Well, apparently they had managed to weather the storm; but those three hours would haunt them all the balance of their lives, they knew. Never had they experienced anything equal to it; and if given a wish it would have been that they might not go through another such spell of agony of body and mind.

There could be no further doubt about what Ned told them being the truth. The wind had indeed died out, and when this came to pass of course the fine sand that had filled the air was gradually settling down again.

The boys stared about them in wonder and consternation. Why, the whole face of the desert seemed to have undergone a positive and most remarkable change. Where gullies had existed before they found hillocks now; and the reverse was quite the rule with regard to former mounds of sand, which had been replaced by depressions.

There was not a remnant of the automobile cover in sight, only a heaping mass of the blown sand topping it off, and making what would seem to resemble the ignoo of a Polar Sea Esquimaux.

"If this don't beat anything I ever struck!" Jack managed to mumble, though it was only with an effort he could speak at all.

Jimmy was staring about him in sore dismay.

"I don't seem able to locate my bearings at all, Ned!" he said, finally.

"Do you mean that you are mixed up because our tracks have all been covered over; is that it, Jimmy?" questioned Ned.

"Well, about that, though my lamps are so full of sand they put me on the blink, I might as well tell you. Which way are we heading, east, north or south, for I do be taking it that we came out of the west, and the sun seems to lie over yonder?"

"We won't be heading anywhere till the night falls and freshens us up more or less," the patrol leader informed him. "Then we'll lay our course due east by north by the stars and push on for all we're worth."

"Do you think we can make the mountains in the night?" Jimmy wanted to know.

"Ask something easy, can't you, Jimmy?" remarked Harry. "How would Ned be able to tell, when it all depends on lots of things. You might give out and say you'd not take another step; or else have your feet so sore and blistered that you just couldn't do it, no matter how you tried. That sort of thing would hold us back, you see, and morning'd be apt to find us still hiking along, the tireddest bunch ever seen. But Ned has hopes, don't you, Mr. Scout Master?"

"That's right, I have," came the heartening

reply, as Ned fanned himself with his dusty campaign hat. "But after coming through that dreadful sand-storm alive it seems to me we ought to have a lot of new confidence injected into us. So far as I'm concerned myself, I believe it's all going to come out right in the end."

"Only the end isn't in sight yet, is that it?" demanded Jimmy, inclined to be a bit skeptical, for he was suffering tortures in not being able to wet his fevered throat with a "wee drop" of cooling water.

"One thing I know," asserted Ned, "no more toting this heavy automobile cover for yours truly. It's served its purpose, but I never could stand to lug it along mile after mile. When we leave this place it stays here, and perhaps will start some fellow guessing later on when he runs across it."

"But how about the blankets?" Jack wanted to know.

"We'll try and stick to them to the last," was the reply he received, "because we've learned in times gone by what it means to be adrift without any covering at night. I don't care whether it's away up in the Hudson Bay country, or down here in the hot lands of the Southwest, blankets come in handy. But of course if we do get held up and have another wearing day ahead of us, they'll be such a burden that we'll have to shut our eyes and drop them, too."

The prospect did not look very pleasant to Jimmy. He always became very much attached to his blanket; indeed, Jack often declared they had the greatest difficulty in separating him from it every morning, he was so fond of sleeping.

"I'd hate to part company with this Navajo blanket I bought in Los Angeles," he declared; "and on that account I'm hopin' that order'll never be given. But here's to lie down and take it as easy as I can till it's time to move on. We might have a bite to eat, but oh! what wouldn't I give for a gallon of spring water right now."

CHAPTER VIII.

A PICTURE IN THE HEAVENS

"This is the dryest supper I ever tackled," grumbled Jimmy, as he worked his jaws energetically some time later.

The sun had set, and already night's shadows were commencing to steal across the face of the desert. They did not bring any noticeable coolness in their train, but that was bound to come later on, the boys knew from what they had heard, read, and even themselves experienced.

"But all the same, it tastes pretty good to me?" Harry volunteered.

"If that was a hint to let you glue your lips for a half a minute to the nozzle of our water jug," commented Jack, "you're barking up the wrong tree, my boy. We all agreed to keep the little that's left to the last extremity, you remember."

Jimmy heaved a sigh of such tremendous size that it seemed to come up from his very shoes. He also shook his head sadly at the same time and remarked as well as his full mouth would allow:

"I only hope then that the emergency don't come when I choke tryin' to swallow this dry feed, that's all. It'd sure be a burnin' shame to have to waste all the rest of that water givin' me relief. And the worst of it is I wouldn't be able to appreciate a thing, either."

"He means," explained Harry, "that just now the thing that would please him more than anything else in the wide world would be to sit down and, with a gallon of water, grape juice or something else liquid, quench that great big thirst he's accumulatin'."

"Accumulatin'!" gasped Jimmy, tears in his bloodshot eyes as he gulped down the dry mass he had been so industriously chewing for five minutes; "say, I've had the same by me ever since we struck this heathenish country. You remember how often I tackled the jug, just to wet my noggin? Oh! if ever I get back to a civilized country where they have drinks on tap, I tell you there's going to be a famine in that land until I get a stock laid in. I feel right now as if I could hold a barrel or more."

"It's getting dark, you notice," remarked Ned.

"I'm glad of it," declared Harry. "I never was so tired of seeing the sun shine in all my life. I've heard people say that was the way they felt in Southern California, but I never knew before what it meant."

"It does get terribly monotonous, that's a

fact," admitted Jack. "Bad enough when you can sit in the shade and take a drink every time the notion strikes you; but I say, it's ten times worse to be in the fix we're in now."

"Look ahead, and you'll see a cloud with a silver lining hanging low down over the horizon," Ned told them, always cheery and hopeful.

"Oh! what if it should rain, and we could spread our blankets to get a supply?" Jimmy suggested, a rapturous look on his freckled face.

"Small chance of anything like that, I should think," Harry allowed.

"I don't believe it ever rains here over the desert," Ned told them. "If it did, why the place would soon stop being what it is, and blossom like the rose. Water can make even such a sandy waste as this grow date palms and lots of things. Around a water hole they make an oasis that travelers use for a stopping place. There are spots where a little irrigation has turned a desert into the loveliest garden in the whole Southwest. No, much as we'd like to have it rain, don't anybody count for a minute on that happening."

They sat there for some time, resting, and occasionally exchanging remarks, so that by degrees some of their former ambition and courage came back to their tired frames.

"I move we start on," suggested Jimmy, finally.

This seemed to be the general feeling, for both Jack and Harry seconded the motion. It was not that they preferred tramping to sleeping; but with so little water in hand they could not afford to lie idle and wait until that miserable old sun peeped up again, to start his burning operations afresh.

So they said good-bye to the last of their automobile. It had cost them only a comparatively small amount of money, but all of the boys begrudged even this, because they had had so little satisfaction from the purchase. And with the loss of the top they would wash their hands of the whole business. As they had said several times, the ordinary broncho or cayuse would be good enough for their purpose after that.

The stars being easily seen, since the atmosphere became very clear once the sun had vanished, it was no difficult task for any one of them to lay out their expected course. They had practiced that ever since joining the organized scouts, as it is one of the first things a tenderfoot is supposed to study.

At first it was tiresome, for the heat still clung to the sand, charged as it was with the accumulated power of the rays of the sun. This sensation they knew would gradually give place to more comfortable conditions, as the night grew

older. Then walking would be more comfortable for them all.

An hour passed.

Although the boys stumbled frequently, on account of their weakness, and the fact that it was no easy task to make their way along over such inequalities that barred their course, as a rule, these mishaps brought no disasters in their train. They only served to evoke a grunt from the unlucky one, with possibly a word of jeering comment from a comrade, whose turn likely enough would come next.

Then an unexpected disaster overtook them, which Ned may have dimly conjectured might come to pass when laying his plans, but never given much attention to.

Harry was the victim, it chanced.

He was seen to double his feet under him in some queer way, when starting to descend an unusually high hillock of sand, and then roll in a heap, uttering a cry of pain that somehow pierced Ned's heart.

"Oh! what's happened now?" cried Jimmy, aghast.

"I'm afraid I've gone and sprained my ankle, that's all," mumbled Harry, who was sitting up and feeling of his left foot anxiously.

They gathered around and Ned made an investigation. He found that while it was not a bad sprain, and consequently caused very

little swelling, still it pained Harry to stand on that foot with his whole weight.

"Here's a bad job," the patrol leader remarked, "with Harry lamed so that he's got to hobble along from now on."

"Yes," added Jimmy, "and not a tree in sight either."

"Will you tell me what a tree has to do with my going lame?" asked Harry, as he leaned on Ned, and limped painfully.

"Why, lots," chuckled Jimmy, with a last lingering flash of his old time humor, which they were not likely to see anything more of until they were well out of this scrape. "Stop and think what scouts are taught to do the first thing, when a chum breaks his leg and has it bound up, or goes and contracts a bad sprain—why they are expected to chop branches and make a stretcher, aint they? Well, how in the mischief can we do that here? You can't use this sand for anything but to cook eggs in; and even then, you ain't got a single egg in the bargain, so there you are."

Jimmy relapsed into silence after that outburst, just as though he realized how foolish it was to try and joke and be merry, when everything around looked so dismal, and it was such a terrible effort to talk.

When Ned found that Harry was suffering, he decided that they could not go on any further

for the present. Perhaps in the morning his ankle might be better; or, between them all, they could think up some plan for carrying him.

"That was another time we could have used some nice cold water," Jack remarked, while they were pushing on; "nothing beats it for a sprain, because it keeps the swelling down heaps."

"Huh, think of wasting good water, pouring it over Harry's old foot, would you?" Jimmy grumbled, as though in his mind that would be a burning shame.

"Well, we've got to stop here and rest up a bit," Ned told them.

"Does that mean till morning?" asked Jack, reading between the lines; for he, too, had seen how Harry was struggling along, doing the best he could to bravely refrain from complaining, though the pain caused him to grit his teeth, and it was often difficult to repress the groan that tried to well from his lips.

"Just as like as not," answered Ned, which they might understand to mean that if it seemed best for Harry to stay there that long, they must be satisfied to keep him company.

Accordingly, they all spread their highly prized blankets and made the best of it. The stars, high above their heads, could keep watch over them, for no one thought it worth while to stand guard. What was there to fear out in the

midst of that desert? If a cowardly wolf or coyote came skulking along, he would never dare attack when instinct would tell him the motionless figures only slept, and were not dead.

The balance of that night passed and the boys were astonished when they awoke to find that the eastern sky already gave token of the sun's approach.

It was with ill-concealed dread that they saw the flaming king of day peep above the level horizon to the east, for they could give a pretty good guess that this was bound to be a most exacting day for them.

Somehow no one seemed to have any particular appetite that morning. They took Ned's advice and chewed some shreds of jerked beef that had been brought along, and which did not happen to be all salty. Ned made sure of that fact before telling his chums that this would excite a flow of saliva, and help them resist the parching effect of the heat.

As the morning drew on Ned looked in vain for some hopeful sign ahead. It really seemed as though those mountains must be just as far distant as when they first began to pay attention to them, though common-sense told him that this could not possibly be so.

A dreadful fear began to struggle up in his own brave heart. What if after all they should never be able to keep their strength long enough

to gain the hills? Burdened as they now were with a lame comrade, they had to advance at a greatly reduced pace, and hence would be bound to stay longer on the desert, exposed to that terrible sun. As to deserting Harry, nothing could induce them to do such a cruel thing as that, no matter what threatened.

All of the boys were looking peaked and haggard now. It gave Ned a wrench as he glanced around at his chums from time to time, to see what a stamp of suffering they bore upon their faces, usually so jolly and hopeful.

It was just like Ned to force himself to forget the terrible truth, and try to buoy up the sinking spirits of those associated with him. In a measure he felt responsible for their being in that desperate fix; though truth to tell he had really had no more to do with it than Jimmy; and not near as much as Harry, whose uncle they were going to visit on his ranch beyond the desert's rim.

His words of comfort, and his helpful arm allowed Harry to bear up much longer than he could ever have done under other conditions. There was something magnetic about Ned; he had always been able to enthuse his fellow players in a football or hockey game more than any other boy in the school; and on numerous occasions victory had been pulled out of the very

jaws of defeat simply through his rallying cries and well-set example.

So on the present occasion, as long as he was able to keep the flagging energies of Harry up to a certain point, they could continue that slow forward progress. There would come a time, of course, when Nature would refuse to hold out any longer, and the lame scout must succumb.

Ned hated to think of that time, inevitable as it seemed. He knew that they must then either come to a standstill or else carry Harry along. That last would mean the discarding of their blankets and guns, a thing he would dislike very much to find himself compelled to do.

"No use, Ned, I'm about all in and can't go any further," gasped Harry, as he hung limply to the patrol leader. "Leave me here, and the rest of you go on. After you get to the mountains, if you strike water, why, perhaps, it may revive you enough to let you come back here after me."

"Yes, and how much chance would we stand of finding you in all this waste of sand, tell me that?" Jack asked, angrily.

"There's no use talking, we're goin' to stick together through thick and thin," Jimmy said, weakly, but with a flash of the old determination showing in his face; while under his breath he was heard to mutter; "but I do wish I had a drink, or rather that we all had."

Ned hardly knew what to do. The sun had not yet reached the zenith, and there would come a hotter spell for several hours than that which they were then experiencing. How could they ever stand it, he wondered? Why, all of them would be out of their minds with seeing cooling streams where only the sizzling sand lay about them.

He wondered why Jack had not said his little piece when Harry asked to be left there. Turning toward the other chum, he was surprised to discover a wonderful expression of sudden great joy spreading over his face.

It was as though Jack had found cause for renewed hope, just when ready to give up in dark despair; either that or else the poor fellow was really going out of his mind, because crazy people are apt to laugh where others sigh.

"What is it, Jack?" Ned asked, tenderly.

"Why, we've got all twisted around, seems like, Ned, and instead of heading for the right place, we're shy by several degrees. Look at that, will you? Thought we were told those mountains were uninhabited except by rattlers, wolves and coyotes? Oh! we've just got to push on and get to that place some time to-day. Why, it looks like it was only a few miles away, Ned; and, p'raps, we might even see people walking by that fountain if we used the glasses."

Ned had already turned to look in the direc-

tion which Jack pointed out. What he saw caused him to hold his very breath with awe and stand there as though he had been turned into stone. For there, plainly pictured in the sky, where low-hanging fleecy clouds lay above the horizon, was a beautiful city, with trees as green as they ever grew, streets, houses and even church spires towering high in the air.

CHAPTER IX.

WHEN JIMMY FELT THIRSTY.

No one could say a single word for a full minute, but they stood there drinking in the wonderful vision as though they could not get enough of it.

Ned was not deceived. He knew that it was only a wonderful and rather rare condition of the atmosphere that allowed this sky picture of some far distant city to appear to them, just as though it were but a few miles away.

In which direction the original of the sun photograph lay he could not for the life of him tell; it might be far away to the east or west, south or north; but there it was, in the most beautiful printed colors, just as the sun gilds the rainbow amidst the spray of the waterfall or the falling shower. Ned was positive that any resident of that city might easily have recognized it, once seen planted there among those fleecy white clouds.

Slowly now it was fading away, just as the rainbow loses its vivid hues and is finally swal-

lowed up in the clouds drifting across the heavens.

"Oh! it's getting fainter!" exclaimed Jimmy, stretching out both hands toward the sky city, as though by this means he might restrain its vanishing.

"Yes, the strange haze that produces the mirage is changing," said Ned; "but it is worth while to be able to say we'd looked on such a wonderful sight."

"Oh! was that it, Ned?" cried Jimmy, visibly cruelly disappointed, as his face fell forty-five degrees. "I somehow kept telling myself it was all to the good, and that like as not we'd be in among that bunch of cool trees before two hours, even if we had to carry Harry here. And there she goes aglimmerin' just like a whole lot more of my best schemes. A mirage was it? Well, all I want to say is that I could mighty near hear the splash of that fountain. Now, I can dope how a poor feller goes nutty after seein' such a gay picture, and then finds it's all a dream, with the old hot sand still around him. Somebody, stick a pin in my leg, please, and don't be bashful about doin' the same, either. I want to know if I'm dreamin' or awake."

But no one took the trouble to oblige Jimmy, and so he had to convince himself as to his condition in some other way.

Harry showed that the sudden new hope and

consequent bitter disappointment had about finished him. He dropped down upon the sand, regardless of how it burned through his clothes. All interest in life seemed to have suddenly deserted him, and he was now ready to throw up the game.

Jack was still watching the fading picture. He evidently had had hard work to convince himself that it was all a wonderful delusion, caused by a peculiar condition of the heated atmosphere. These apparent sky pictures, whether seen ashore, on a level prairie or desert, or on the wide ocean, always occur in regions where the sun is very powerful. A low-lying horizon is also essential to their development, it would seem.

Ned had already commenced to cast his eyes about him. He realized that for some reason or other he could see much better than before that remarkable event came about. Possibly the atmosphere became clearer, for something caught his attention away over the desert that caused him to search his pack for the field-glasses he carried, and which he was determined nothing should induce him to abandon, under the most strenuous conditions that might arise.

If the others noticed his action at all, they probably thought like Jimmy, that he only wanted to take a better look at the fading

phantom city before it vanished altogether from view.

"It ain't goin' to do you any good, Ned," Jimmy remarked, disconsolately, "to see that fountain any closer. Mebbe you might hear the talk of the water as it keeps on playin' so cheerily. Oh! just to think of the gallons and gallons agoin' to waste there, and me a *perishin'* for a drink—excuse me, all of us are."

He dropped down beside Harry while saying this in the most forlorn way imaginable, after fixing his Navajo blanket neatly under him so as to keep the heat of the sand as much as possible from contact with his flesh. You would have thought Jimmy contemplated making that stopping place his tomb, from the great care he exercised in posing there.

"Cheer up, everybody!" exclaimed Ned, suddenly; "perhaps, it's going to be all right. Where there are trees, there must be water; that's sure!"

"Trees!" ejaculated Jack, hurriedly; "let's see," and he almost rudely snatched the glasses out of his chum's hand.

"Oh! say it again, Ned; keep on sayin' the same till I sink into a dream," observed Jimmy, allowing a rapturous expression to steal over his face.

Then Jack was heard to add his voice to the excitement.

"Ned, tell me, can that be a mirage, too?" he demanded. "Would it be so cruel as to deceive us twice inside of ten minutes? The other thing has all faded away, but through this glass that bunch of trees stands out as big as a barn. Oh, what if it is all it seems? Say, we could get that far, even carrying Harry, couldn't we?"

"Forget all about me, boys, and get there as fast as you can run," said the lame scout, with utter disregard to his own personal feelings; but then he might just as soon have saved his breath, for not a single one of those others would dream of doing what he asked of them.

"Here, let's two of us help Harry along," suggested Jimmy, eagerly, smacking his parched lips, as though in anticipation he could already taste the cool water they expected to discover there where the trees grew.

"I might walk a little now, perhaps," the lame scout surprised them by saying; it was evident that the wonderful discovery must have inspired him with new hope and consequently a little more aroused ambition.

"Everybody keep watch!" said Jack, just as though he might be possessed of a dreadful fear lest that distant patch of trees discovered by Ned would take wings in some mysterious fashion and vanish, even as that painted city of the sky had done.

Buoyed up by new hopes, they stumbled along.

Each fellow extended a helping hand when one of their number happened to topple over.

"Seems to be holdin' out, don't she, Ned?" asked Jimmy, as though his heart might be in his throat, with the dreadful suspense that was gripping him.

"Oh! there's no question about it any longer, boys," assented the patrol leader cheerily. "Inside of another half-hour we're bound to arrive; and those trees never could flourish where they are unless there was a running spring, or anyway a water-hole there. Hold out just a little while longer, Harry; you're doing fine, let me tell you, isn't he, fellows?"

"Harry's all wool, and a yard wide!" Jack was quick to say.

"He's sure all to the good, and I tip my lid to Harry," Jimmy croaked, for his voice was nearly gone and sounded very much like the note of a big bullfrog; "but Ned, dear, since we're this close to a new supply, couldn't you let a poor feller just wet his lips with the little there's still in the jug. Oh! I am *so* thirsty, and I want a drink so bad."

But Ned was inexorable. He did not believe that last gasp had come as yet; and until they were absolutely sure of a fresh supply, it was policy to hang on to the last the jug contained.

"Just hold your horses, Jimmy," he said; "you ought to be able to stand it for a little

while longer. Keep thinking of what a glorious time you'll have pretty soon, and how you'll fill up until you come near bursting. We're getting closer all the time now, you notice, and the trees are real."

"If they fade away like that other thing, I'd drop right here in my tracks and give up the ghost!" Jack declared, vehemently.

"I don't believe it," Ned told him. "You're made of the stuff that never says die as long as there's a single chance left. But don't worry, for they won't fade away. This is a sure cinch, and the luck of the thing lies in our having struck this one place in a thousand."

"Steady now, Jimmy, you wouldn't be so mean as to try and get ahead of the rest of us, I hope, while Harry is debarred from running? Let's keep in a bunch and all come upon the spring together."

Jimmy saw the wisdom of this and, while it might be a terribly hard task to restrain his impatience, he fell back and even tried to lend a helping hand, in order that Harry's progress might be somewhat hastened.

When they presently entered among the trees, Jimmy made for the little depression, where they could see that animals had been in the habit of drinking. The glitter of water caught his eye, and he gave a gurgle of delight, for he

found his voice too far gone to raise it to the pitch of a shout.

Just as he was about to throw himself down alongside the water-hole and quench his burning thirst, Ned leaped forward and clutching his arm held him back.

"W—what's the matter, Ned? Aint you goin' to let me dip in? For goodness' sake, let go my sleeve, can't you?" he stammered, being so excited that he hardly knew what he was saying.

"Look there!" said Ned, with an expression of horror in his voice and even as he spoke he picked up a stick that chanced to be lying there, bent over and deliberately fished a dead rattle snake out of the little pool!

The four scouts stared at each other as though dismay filled their hearts. After experiencing all their wild hopes and fears, to be balked in this fashion was too cruel. They certainly could not drink a drop of that water because it must be poisoned, since the dead snake had been lying in it for some time.

Jimmy groaned and hid his face between his hands, as though he could not stand the sight any longer. That water lying there fairly tantalized him, and it was only by a supreme effort that he kept himself from rushing forward, throwing himself down by the brink of the pool and quenching his torturing thirst, be the consequences what they might.

As usual it was Ned who was the first to see fresh hope springing up.

"Let's look into this thing," he said, quickly; "and first of all notice that this pool is at the edge of the motte. That looks as if the water in it might ooze here from another place. I can't see any sign of a spring anywhere about it, which would be the case if this was the only water-hole."

"Oh! do you think there can be another, then?" demanded Harry, piteously.

Ned was already bending down the better to examine the surroundings of the little pool. Here again his scout training came into play, for his eye was immediately attracted to where the ground was moist, and from this he knew that the water came from that quarter.

He started to follow it up, step by step, while the other three dogged his footsteps, struggling between hope and fear.

Then all at once Ned gave a whoop and increased his pace.

"Have you found it, and is there a running spring?" cried Jack, as he in turn assisted the lame scout to move forward, Harry stifling more than one groan as his injured ankle pained him.

"It's all right, boys!" called back Ned; "a beautiful little spring, bubbling up out of the sand, and plenty for a dozen fellows to drink their fill!"

"Bully for you, Ned," said Jimmy, "because I was so thirsty!"

They quickly saw that there was nothing to hinder them from quenching their desire for water at this spring, and the way they set to work would have highly amused some of their comrades back in New York, could they have seen the performance.

In fact, Jimmy came so often for another turn that Jack told him he would surely burst, unless he got another hoop around him. Jimmy, however, persisted in sitting close to the spring, so that whenever the humor seized him he could just lean over and take a few more quaffs.

They were soon feeling a thousand per cent better. Even Harry declared that his ankle had been much improved by the cooling stream that Ned and Jack poured over it. Jimmy had filled the water jug, so as to make sure of that much of a supply ahead. He seemed to be haunted by a strange fear that after all he would wake up to find himself back there on the burning sand, and that all this glorious happening was only a cruel dream.

After a while they began to realize that they were getting hungry for a cooked meal, something they had not enjoyed for some time.

"Here's plenty of waste wood handy," said Jimmy, of course, the first to notice the bounties of Nature along these lines; "and say, it strikes me the smell of coffee in the air would about

cap things off right now. Nothing to equal a cup of fragrant Java, when you're thirsty. And let me tell you, I know now what it means for a shipwrecked sailor to be perishing for a drink. From this time on I'll never take one without feeling sorry for the poor fellers that are wantin' such the worst kind and wishin' I could hand it to 'em."

That was Jimmy all over, as generous as any scout who ever wore the honored khaki. He had just passed through a bitter experience that would linger long in his memory. Nor were the others apt to soon forget the dismal prospect that they had so recently faced. They might be a jolly parcel of boys and not apt to devote much thought to the things that had gone, under the belief that the mill will never grind with the water that is past; but there was something so particularly thrilling in what they had experienced that it could never be forgotten.

But when the meal was prepared and they sat around enjoying it, really the only cloud that seemed to be upon their horizon was the fact that Harry had injured his ankle and would be apt to suffer more or less for some little time to come.

During the progress of the meal it was decided to stay there at the oasis until another night arrived, when refreshed they could start once more, heading for the range of mountains which they now saw very plainly, showing that they could not be many miles away.

CHAPTER X.

SKELETON RIDGE AT LAST.

Relieved from their anxieties the scouts passed the balance of that eventful day quite comfortably.

Jimmy never seemed to tire of sitting close to the brim of that fine little spring, and every once in so often taking a small drink. Every time he did so the others could hear him give expression to his gratitude, and it always ended up with those words: "but oh! I was so thirsty!"

During that afternoon a miracle was wrought; at least, it seemed to border on this to Ned and two of the other scouts.

The leader of the little expedition to the Death Valley region was lying there figuring on about how long it ought to take them to cover the remaining ground lying between the oasis and the mountain range, especially with a lame chum, when all at once he heard Jack give utterance to a gasp.

"What's the matter with you?" asked Ned, hastily.

"I guess he's gone crazy!" Jack muttered.

"Who has—Jimmy, for drinking as if he had a grudge against our spring, and meant to try and keep it next door to dry?" the patrol leader continued, smiling.

"Oh! no, *he's* been nutty ever since we struck here," Jack told him; "I'm referring to Harry now. Look at him and see what he's doing, Ned!"

Accordingly the party spoken to turned his head so that he could see, and was very much amused to find that the other scout was actually dancing what might be called a sailor's hornpipe, going through all sorts of extravagant movements and, to all appearances, enjoying it immensely.

This was all very well, but it seemed rather out of place for a fellow who had so recently been groaning with the pain of what appeared to be a sprained ankle.

Just then it happened that Jimmy, too, caught sight of what was going on; and, of course, he immediately started to calling Harry down.

"Here, you, what's got into your noddle?" he exclaimed. "Sit down and let that old ankle of yours rest, so you c'n toddle along with us to-night. What d'ye mean jumpin' around like you're nutty? To the foolish house for you! Hey! Ned, Jack, look at the silly, would you? Hadn't I better jump on him and make him behave?"

At that Harry stopped his dancing for a minute.

"Just mind your own business, Jimmy, if you please," he remarked, with a broad grin of pleasure. "I ought to know what I'm about, hadn't I? This is my ankle, aint it? Well, just fall back and let me alone."

"But what does it all mean, Harry?" asked Ned.

"Yes, let us in, wont you?" added the bewildered Jack. "Say, I hope now you haven't been soldiering all this time, and giving us a big scare for nothing. Is that ankle sprained or not?"

"I thought it was," Harry explained, "because it hurt like anything; but, strange to say, the pain seems to have disappeared like magic, and I can bear my whole weight on the same without hardly feeling it."

Jimmy gave a whoop.

"The water did it!" he cried. "The fine water cure it is, for a fact. Taken outwardly and inwardly at the same time, it performs miracles. Look what it's done for me, will you?"

"Yes," laughed Jack, "just see. Three hours ago you couldn't drink a single drop of water, no matter how much you tried, and now you're able to take gallons and gallons of the same. Wonderful! Never heard the equal of a miracle like that. But, Harry, all the same I'm mighty

glad to know you've recovered the use of that leg of yours. Ned'll say the same thing, I'm sure."

"That's right, Jack," the scout master declared, with an emphasis that left no doubt as to his sincerity, "if Harry's feeling so well that he can do his share of the walking without being helped, it's going to make things easier for the rest of us. Besides, a sprain is a bad thing, and it would be apt to give him trouble right along, which would be hard when he reached his uncle's ranch and wanted to get around the country. So here's congratulations, Harry. Only be a little easy on that weak ankle, and favor it all you can."

"That means I'd better stop trying to dance the tango by myself," chuckled the other scout, and after coming to this sensible conclusion he dropped back into a half-reclining position, to rub the injured ankle carefully, and later on apply still more of the cold water.

They had plenty of time before night came on in which to talk matters over and lay out plans for the immediate future.

It was strange how soon the miseries of the past began to fade from their minds. While wandering there on that burning desert, with a dismal future staring them in the face, each and every scout fancied that he had seen enough of

this arid country to last him a life-time. And yet such is the enthusiasm of youth that already most of their troubles had been almost forgotten, and they could even stoically plan to face another venture along the same lines.

To go back would be worse than continuing their trip. Besides, they now had an abundance of good water, and with that in hand could dare a great deal.

So the result of all this talking was that not a single one of them voted to show the white feather. To give up an object they had planned to carry out, just because it was difficult of attainment, did not suit these boys at all. They were of the type that rather tries again and again, and hates to surrender above all things.

Gradually, the sun sank to the horizon, and then seemed to drop out of sight in a hurry, as though ashamed of having done so much evil since dawn.

Jimmy was making another cooking fire, for he said that as there could be no telling when they might have so good a chance to eat a decent supper again, it would be a real shame to neglect the opportunity. Trust Jimmy for finding all manner of splendid excuses for eating. He was like the men who drink—one because it is so hot; another on account of feeling chilly; a third, because he's dry; still a fourth, on ac-

count of having got wet in a rain, with fears of the consequences; and so on down the list. Jimmy was fertile in resources, very.

But then the others were not averse to having a cup of fragrant coffee. Besides, as Jimmy artfully suggested, it would serve to lighten their packs somewhat, and at a time like this "every little helps."

They sat around for a while after eating, to let the sand cool off somewhat before starting forth. The water jug was filled to the brim by Jimmy, who also took a last, long farewell turn at the friendly spring. He stayed so long that Jack had to fairly drag him away, Jimmy expostulating that it was a shame not to let him get "just one more mouthful" while the chance held good.

"You may be sorry yet because you kept me from topping off with that last swig, Jack," he said reproachfully, as he accompanied the others out upon the open; "if some time you hear me raving for a drink, you'll wish you'd let me lay in just a little more. But then, the mountains ain't so very far away, and at night time mebbe I mightn't get so *ravenously* thirsty."

"Let's hope not, anyway," said Jack.

They tramped on steadily for a long while.

Ned had taken his bearings, of course, and knew just where he was aiming to go. The stars were his guide posts, and never could better

ones be found. If a scout has made up his mind to do a little studying in astronomy, he need never have any fear of not being able to find his way about, because stars and sun and moon will not deceive him, by day or by night.

Just as they had expected the night air grew cooler as the hours advanced, until traveling was far from being a burden. Even Harry seemed able to keep up with his comrades, though, at times, he limped a little when he happened to forget that he must favor the injured ankle.

It began to get somewhat monotonous and tiresome when midnight came and found them still on the go. Ned, however, encouraged them from time to time.

"If you look ahead right now," he told them, "you'll see the mountains outlined against the sky. And this time there's no humbug about it; no deceptive haze like in the day, when the glaring sun is all around us. We're not more than a mile or two away from our goal, believe me, fellows!"

"Then we've just *got* to get there," declared Harry, firmly, "if I have to walk on my hands and knees."

"That would be a queer way of walkin', I think!" said Jimmy, laughing; and after that they pushed on with renewed vim.

All of them rejoiced when they finally reached the foot of the mountain range. The Skeleton Ridge of the Telescope Range did not seem to offer any great inducement for camping or hunting, since it was only sparsely covered with a thin growth of poor looking trees, and seemed to be composed mostly of bare rocks, amidst which, perhaps, the wolves and coyotes had their dens, but little else.

But there were signs of gold in many places adjoining the terrible Death Valley, and that was a lure that in times past had caused many a prospector to make his way across the hot Mojave Desert, and even wander helplessly in Death Valley itself, until overcome.

"All we want to do is to look for water here in the morning," said Ned, as the little expedition reached the border of the desert, and actually found trees around them once more.

"Yes," added Jack, breathing a sigh of relief, for he was "dog tired" after so long and monotonous a tramp, "and then when we're good and ready we can settle on our plans for the rest of the jaunt."

When they could call that desert journey by such a light name, it seemed as though the terrors of the trip had not daunted the scouts to any great extent.

"Another thing," Jimmy was heard to say, as though pleased, "we'll have all the wood we

want around here. No goin' without a pot of coffee while we hang our hats up at this mountain inn. It's what I call a cinch, boys."

"Where will we camp to-night?" asked Harry, wearily, for the long walk had about done him up, since he had not been in as good condition as the rest, and had really covered the last mile or two "on his nerve," as Jimmy would say.

"Shucks! that doesn't matter worth a cent," Jimmy spoke up immediately; "because we've got nearly a jug full of water, and there's heaps of firewood all around on the sides of the mountains. All I hope is that I don't run across any snakes. You know I want to skidoo when rattlers come around, because I can't bear 'em. And it strikes me these rocks would be just the right sort of place to harbor a kit of that breed."

"Oh! we'll be on the lookout for snakes," Jack hastened to assure him. "None of the rest of us fancy the vipers any more than you do, Jimmy."

They did not make any attempt to scale the ridge that night, because all of the party felt too tired; and besides, there was really no such need for haste. After putting in a few hours of sleep, perhaps they would summon resolution enough to do the climb, though Ned really hoped to find some sort of canyon that would allow of their passage to the eastward side of the ridge, without mounting to the top.

Jimmy insisted on making a fire, if only for the purpose of seeing what the nature of their proposed camping ground was like. The possibility of having venomous snakes for bed-fellows gave him "the creeps," and the first thing he did after getting some light on the subject was to skirmish all around, threshing the scanty bushes with a stick, in order to serve warning upon any concealed reptiles that their presence would not be tolerated.

After that he was ready to settle down and arrange his blanket, so that he might be fairly comfortable during the rest of the night.

"What a good thing it is we saved these bully blankets," he was heard to say as he cuddled there. "Wouldn't we be havin' a hard time of it without the same."

"Yes," remarked Jack, "and yet I heard you more than once threaten to drop your bundle when the sun beat down so fierce. At that time, I guess, you couldn't hardly believe you'd ever be cold again, eh, Jimmy?"

"But thanks to Ned, here, I didn't do the same," replied Jimmy, naively. "That's what we've got him along with us for, to do our thinkin' for us. Ned's a brick, and we all know it. Whenever we look back, don't we see lots of times when we didn't know which way to turn, and who helped us out of the scrape, but Ned?"

"Here, enough of that piffle," remarked the scout master, pretending to speak sternly, though his heart was always very tender toward Jimmy; "we've got troubles enough on our hands, without any of that sort of gush to bother about. What we want to do now is to put a lock on our tongues and get some sleep."

"That's meant straight goods for you, Jimmy," said Jack; "in plain language, dry up, and give us all a rest. What time is it about now?"

Ned just glanced aloft to where the stars gemmed the heavens, and noted the position of a certain planet that hovered close to the horizon in the west.

"That's my clock," he said, "I had it figured out that when Mars dropped out of sight, it would be just one in the morning."

"We'll get about four hours sleep before the sun rises, then," Harry remarked, with a yawn.

"Nearer five, you mean," Jack corrected him.

"Call it seven and be done with it," Jimmy muttered, "for it's goin' to be hard to get me up before that time."

"Unless one of us starts breakfast going; let you once smell the coffee in the air, and you'll be stirring, all right," chuckled Harry, from the depths of his blanket.

Then they all sat up again, with their heads cocked on one side, listening intently.

There had come to their ears that heavy booming sound that seemed to make the very rocks under them vibrate and tremble. Indeed, so pronounced was this shaking sensation that the alarmed Jimmy, throwing aside his blanket, made a rush for the nearest tree, which he started to hug with the greatest vim, as though under the belief that it might add to his security should the "earthquake" become any more violent.

CHAPTER XI.

THE PROSPECTORS' CAMP.

"It's all over now, Jimmy, and you can come in again!" called Jack, with more or less of irony in his voice, as he looked at the chum who was clasping his arms around the stunted oak.

"Don't you be too sure of that, now," replied the other scout, still keeping his hold, as though he knew a good thing when he saw it. "Think I want to be carried away by a tornado, do you? This place is some exposed to the fury of the wind, let me tell you. We ought to have camped in a canyon, that's what."

Jack laughed out real loud.

"Listen to him, boys," he said, "honest now, if Jimmy doesn't think that must have been a wild and woolly Western cyclone. Do you hear anything now? If it was wind, how did it come to die away so sudden like? Come in, Jimmy, and quit hugging that tree. If you must practice while you're away from your best girl, wait till the rest of us are asleep. I'm ashamed of you. A cyclone, eh? Strikes me the way you

hustled to get to that same tree was about as good a circus as any tornado could ever show."

Jimmy came back rather hesitatingly. He acted as though ready to make a bee-line for that same friendly tree at the slightest recurrence of that heavy crashing sound.

"What d'ye make it out to be, Ned?" asked the puzzled Harry.

"Well, I'm groping in the dark about as much as the rest of you," returned the scout master, shaking his head.

"Thunder?" Jack remarked, inquiringly.

"Show me the clouds first," Ned told him; and upon looking around they were unable to detect the first sign of a bank of low-lying clouds from which the loud crash might have sprung.

"But as we can see only half the heavens now," Ned continued, "because the mountain range hides what lies in the east, it might have been thunder. All the same, I don't believe it."

"Why not?" demanded Jack, who seemed to have settled it in his mind this must be the only explanation of the strange sound that had startled them.

"There are lots of reasons," Ned informed him.

"As what?"

"In the first place, you all noticed, of course, that it came from the other side of the mountains, and not to the westward of us," Ned

remarked, at which even Jimmy nodded his head in the affirmative, for they had to admit the fact.

"Well," continued Ned, "you know what lies away off there to the northeast of this line of rocky hills?"

"Sure we do," admitted Jack; "Death Valley, it is; the chart tells us that."

"One of the driest places ever known, and with a stagnant atmosphere that has killed its scores of human beings, not to mention myriads of animals in years gone by. You remember we heard that prospector say it never rained in Death Valley. And if that's the case, wouldn't it be queer if on two different nights now thunder was heard, just one crash each night, coming from that section?"

The others exchanged mystified looks.

"You put it up to us pretty strong now, Ned, sure you do," admitted Jimmy.

"And why should it always be at night time, instead of in the day?" observed Harry, coming around to Ned's view of the case.

"That's part of the mystery. If it was thunder, you'd expect it to break out any old time. But perhaps we'll have a chance to learn something more about this when we get over the mountains," and Ned made as though ready to settle down again.

"You said there were prospect of finding gold all through this section of country, Ned," Jack next remarked, thoughtfully; "now, could it be that some men have sunk a mine in these Telescope Mountains, and what we heard were big blasts meant to crumble the rock away?"

"That's possible, Jack," admitted the other, "and there's a chance it'll turn out to be something like it. But why just one explosion? We've got to make up our minds not to let it worry us, and go on about our own business. One thing sure, it isn't going to hurt us, no matter what Jimmy thinks; for this is no earthquake or cyclone, but something probably caused through human agencies. And now please let me get a few winks of sleep."

"So say we all of us," added Jack, composing himself under his blanket; while Harry and Jimmy did likewise, each keeping his gun handy, in case they were visited during the night by any prowling wolf that would invite annihilation at their hands.

Jimmy it was noticed made very sure to fix his bed close to that friendly tree. It was evident that he did not have the fullest confidence in what the others had been saying. In spite of it all, there was a chance that the awful noise and the quaking of the earth had been caused by some subterranean forces of Nature. Perhaps there was an old volcano in the neighbor-

hood, and the pent-up fires of the ages were struggling to get free again. Jimmy was taking no chances. He believed in having "an anchor out to windward," even though the night might seem peaceful enough. That was like insuring one's house, while not expecting it to burn down.

But after all Jimmy's fears turned out to be groundless. Nothing happened to disturb their slumbers. The balance of the night passed peacefully; at least, there was no further thunderous explosions to awaken the sleepers. And if wolves or coyotes, wandering in search of food, scented the camp, they were wise enough to give it a wide berth, as though understanding what the presence of those "shooting sticks" meant for their kind.

Morning came and they were presently astir.

Around the fire, as breakfast cooked, they continued their talk as to their future plans, and all sorts of suggestions were made; some good, and others indifferent.

At the same time, it might be noticed that none of the four scouts so much as gave the slightest hint looking to turning back.

"Why," said Jack, when the matter happened to be brought up, "strikes me that would be a silly thing to do, because, in the first place, we'd have to cross that Mojave Desert a second time. Might just as well make for Death Valley, and

if we do get through there alive, it'll be something to boast about."

"Are there any Injuns around this section, I want to know?" Jimmy was asking, as he took the coffee pot off, after the contents had boiled up violently just three times, and on each occasion been given half a cup of cold water to settle it again, for Jimmy was very particular about how he made his beloved drink.

"Well," Jack told him, "there used to be a tribe called Mojaves or something like that. Then down in the northwestern part of Arizona there's the Hualpai Indian Reservation; and, I suppose you might run across some wandering warriors of other tribes here and there. If it's Indians you want to see, Jimmy, wait till we get to the cattle ranch; Harry says his uncle has visits from them once in a while, and lots of trouble in the bargain."

"Yes," remarked Harry, "and over in the region of the Great Colorado Canyon can be found the old cliff dwellings of the Moqui Indians. I'd like to visit that place before we go home, if a chance came around; because I've been deeply interested in reading about the queer habits of the cliff dwellers."

"Let's hope the chance hits us, then?" observed Jimmy; "but since the coffee's ready, we might as well get busy with our fins and jaws. As long as the grub and water hold out, who

cares what the plan is? Anybody can do the figgerin', if you only don't forget to call me when breakfast's ready."

"There's one thing that bothers me," Ned remarked, as they settled down in their places, so as to partake of the meal.

"I wish only one kept me busy thinkin'," Jimmy told them; "but go on and tell us what that is, Ned."

"We ought to have some sort of mounts to help out, and then things wouldn't be so hard on us," was what the other told them.

"That's so, we had," declared Jimmy, promptly; "and say, let's drop around to the hoss-market right after breakfast, to pick out a broncho apiece and some burros for pack animals."

"We might make a try, anyway," Ned added, smilingly, and there was something about his manner that caused Harry to exclaim:

"Go on and tell us what you know, Ned; because I can clearly see you've got a cracking good card up your sleeve right now."

That started Jimmy and Jack adding their voices to Harry's appeal.

"'Taint fair to keep us awallowin' in doubt when you've made a discovery, Ned," Jimmy ventured, "and for one I just can't eat a single bite till you open up."

"Well, perhaps the chance to get one or more pack animals might come our way," Ned began. "Listen, and I'll explain how. You saw me using the glasses while breakfast was cooking? I saw a suspicious smoke off there to the north, where the mountains seem to break and offer a better chance for crossing than here, because there must be more canyons. Well, through the glasses I saw a camp of prospectors. There are just two of them, and one seems to be sick, if I could judge from the way the other waited on him. They have a lot of burros, and perhaps, might sell us a couple."

"Oh! joy!" cried Jimmy. "That'd mean we wouldn't have to lug our blankets on our backs any more, wouldn't it? Not that I'm sayin' a word against my splendid Navajo robe, you notice, for I think worlds of the same. Let's hurry and get through with grub, so we can head up that way and find out."

It was such a novel thing to hear Jimmy wanting to make haste when there was any eating going on that Jack declared he was afraid the torrid sun must have turned his poor brain. But in a short time they had finished eating and were on the move, headed due north.

By keeping near the foot of the mountains they did not find the going very bad, and an hour later drew near the camp of the prospectors. At their approach one of the men seized

a rifle and covered them with it; but Ned gave the peace sign, by holding both hands up with the palms turned toward the other party, and fingers extended, at which they were invited to come in.

It proved that Ned had made a most remarkable guess, for one of the two inmates of the prospectors' camp was quite ill, and they were even then starting to pack up their stuff, with the idea of returning to the town from which they had started out a month or so before.

They had found lots of "signs" of the precious metal, but never in quantities that would pay them for staking claims and starting in mining.

Then, casually as it were, Ned suggested that possibly they would like to dispose of some of the large amount of stuff they had brought out with them, under the impression that they might be gone six months.

Before long a bargain was struck that was advantageous to both sides. The boys found themselves in possession of four able-bodied burros, and considerable stores besides, while the disappointed prospectors were glad to get rid of part of their now useless outfit.

All seemed plain sailing to Ned and his chums now. Fortified by this addition to their outfit they could face the future without flinching, even though a part of their venture-

some plans called for passing through that valley of the evil name.

"How about askin' these parties about that awful thunder noise, Ned?" Jimmy suggested, when they were thinking of pulling out, and starting to follow a canyon they had been told would take them to the eastern side of the ridge. "If they didn't make it themselves, mebbe they might know who did; or if it was away down in the bowels of the earth like I've been thinkin'?"

"That's a good idea of yours, Jimmy," the leader told him, "and I'll find out right away."

It proved that neither of the prospectors could enlighten the boys in the least with regard to the origin of those terrific crashes that made the earth tremble.

"We've been hearing the same night after night for two weeks now," the well man told them. "Fust they skeered us, but soon we got to figgerin' that it must be some miners workin' and blastin' the rock, and as it wasn't none of our business we didn't try to butt in. Dangerous work doin' that in these parts, you know. Mind your own affairs is the motto they go by. So we got to payin' little attention to the racket."

"Did you ever know the sound to happen more than once in a night?" asked Ned.

"Don't know that it did, come to think of it," the prospector replied. "But that'd be because

they had to put in a lot of time preparin' the blast, you see. Reckon none o' us'll ever jest know what the same might be; and me and my pal ain't carin', either. To git back home alive again is all he wants, and so as his wife kin nuss him, which is what he needs most of all. So-long, boys, and plenty o' luck!"

Of course the prospector could not imagine that any sane person, man or boy, was going to come all the way to this desert country and risk his life many times unless lured by the hope of "striking it rich." And that was what he meant when wishing the scouts good luck, even though he and his mate had found none.

Feeling many times in better spirits the four boys continued their forward progress. The past might be something of a nightmare, but it was gone, and they had the future to think of, that and the present. The prospectors had told them where they could find a good spring, the last chance to secure a supply of water that they might expect until at the other side of Death Valley; and they were heading for that now.

"We'll take things slow," Ned told them as they walked beside the burros, with their loads in the shape of water-carriers and blankets and stores; "and after we've figured it all out we can strike for the valley. But remember

that if you feel like making any change in the plan speak out while there's time. We can still go around and avoid the worst hole in the entire Southwest."

He looked at each of his comrades while saying this, but no one as much as made the slightest suggestion that way. Come what would they had apparently made up their minds to investigate the mysteries and perils of Death Valley; and were not to be kept back simply because different people had warned them that it was taking their lives in their hands to enter there.

CHAPTER XII.

AN INDIAN RAID

It was evident from what Ned, as the leader of the little expedition, said, that he was in no particular haste to leave the mountain range, and strike out for the valley that lay to the northeast.

When they struck the water hole, with its running spring, it was already close to high noon. The sun seemed hotter than ever, and out there on the desert they could see the white sand shimmering in the fierce heat. Somehow a little of their enthusiasm began to wane.

"What's to hinder us from sticking it out here the balance of the day and making a fresh start in the cool of the early morning?" Jack wanted to know.

Harry nodded his head to signify that he quite agreed with the speaker; while Jimmy, who was already busily engaged in lowering the water in the spring, waved a hand toward them as if to vote in the affirmative. With that inducement to linger in the shape of plenty

to drink, Jimmy could always be counted on to say "stay."

Ned himself was of the same mind; indeed, he had not considered such a thing as breaking upon that scorching tract of treeless country in the worst part of the day. And so they went into camp.

The burros were fastened securely, the prospectors having shown the boys how to do this, and at the same time give the animals opportunities to graze upon the scanty tufts of grass to be found here and there among the rocks.

"We ain't takin' any chances of havin' our donkeys stray away, and leavin' us in the lurch!" Jimmy went on to say, as he helped stake the beasts of burden out.

"But of course we've got all the stores safe here, with the blankets and our gun supply," Harry remarked; "which would be some comfort in case Indians raided the camp."

"What's that you say?" exclaimed Jimmy, uneasily; "d'ye mean there's a chance of havin' real reds break in on us, and try to make way with our stuff?"

He picked up his repeating rifle as he said this, and fingered the lock of the same as though he meant to be on his guard after that, unless Harry were simply joking.

"Well, one of those men told me they'd had trouble, and lost one burro loaded with supplies,

though they managed to save the rest. These Indians when they leave the Reservations seem to think they must revert to the original type, and do something in the way of horse stealing, just to keep their hands in."

"Yes, and I reckon they also want to have some whoppin' big stories to spin after they get back home again," Jimmy added; "but they'd better count the consequences well before they give us a call; because we're all armed, and ready to pour the hot shot in on 'em like fun."

Jimmy said this quite loud, though not in any boasting tone, but rather with the idea of issuing a solemn warning that any lurking trespasser might hear and take to his heart.

He also looked around him at each inoffensive rock, and scowled fiercely. Had there happened to be any spy near by he must have realized from the manner of Jimmy that the handwriting was on the wall, and it would be a very risky thing to attempt to raid that camp of vigilant scouts.

Jimmy was once more busied in gathering firewood, one of the most pleasant occupations with him, because it suggested so many delights to come. And the others were not at all averse to letting him cater to this weakness, for it saved them more or less waste of energy while Jimmy bustled around.

They took things easy that afternoon.

Each in turn climbed to a little pinnacle of rock that seemed just suited for a lookout station, and with the glass surveyed that region far off, where lay the most notorious stretch of land to be found in all the border of the United States, and well named Death Valley.

Of course they could not see anything that was apt to be of advantage to them when they came to start forth, bent on making the passage of that dismal stretch of country; but there was a sort of fascination in looking in that direction, while indulging in all sorts of wild speculations. Ned could imagine a cabin boy perched in the crow's-nest on board a vessel, sailing the mysterious Southern seas, and while surveying the wide expanse of blue water ahead, trying to picture the lovely coral islands that would soon be looming up on the distant horizon.

All through the live-long day there was not the faintest indication of a cloud on the copper-colored sky. The other scouts remembered what Ned had said about rain never falling in this torrid country. If they heard that remarkable boom again on the coming night, sounding like the discharge of a broadside of fourteen inch guns on a new Dreadnought type of battleship, they could put it down for

settled that it was no thunder of the clouds, but something caused by man.

Jimmy had been up on the rock last of all. It was now getting on toward the middle of that long afternoon, when the others, lolling there in camp, saw him hurrying toward them with all the indications of bringing exciting news.

As they had just been talking about that mysterious cough of the mountain that seemed to make the whole earth quiver with its violence, it was perhaps only natural Ned and Harry and Jack should jump to the conclusion that their comrade had made some discovery looking to an explanation of the puzzle.

Through that long-distance glass possibly Jimmy had picked up a far-off camp of miners, working some rich ore lode.

"What is it, Jimmy?" asked Ned, as the other came running in, waving his gun in one hand, and the precious glasses in the other.

"The Injuns have come, just as you said Harry!" was Jimmy's startling announcement, causing the others to scramble to their feet, and reach for their guns.

"Where?" demanded Jack incredulously, as he looked hastily around, and failed to discover a single sign of the enemy.

"Better get the burros in, I tell you!" Jimmy continued, persistently; and they could easily

see that he was not joking, for his freckled face gave every indication of the excitement.

"All right, then?" Ned remarked; "you come with me, Jimmy and Jack, leaving Harry to guard the camp."

The three immediately started toward the point where the four burros were feeding, the grass being so scanty that it kept them busy all the time in order to satisfy their hunger; indeed, the other boys had settled it that they were gifted with appetites equal to the famous one owned by Jimmy, and which cried out continually for "more."

"Where did you sight them, Jimmy?" asked Ned, wondering whether it would turn out to be a wild-goose chase after all.

"They're mounted on hosses, and makin' so as to cut off our burros. You'll see now in about three shakes of a lamb's tail. There, look right now, ain't that somethin' amovin' behind the fringe o' bushes?"

"Just what it is, Jimmy!" cried Ned; "hurry along boys, and be ready to give the red thieves a volley from your guns as soon as they show up. We mustn't let them run our animals away, if we have to riddle them. All the same, remember that you're scouts and don't do any more damage than you have to."

This was rather confusing advice, but then

Ned was himself somewhat excited with the situation, and his chums doubtless understood what he meant to convey.

As they ran they kept their rifles in evidence, so as to be ready to let them speak, and carry notes of warning to the dusky marauders as soon as they showed up from behind the line of bushes now screening them.

It was easy to follow the advance of the leading horseman, and Ned knew just at what time to expect him to burst forth.

"Ready, boys!" he exclaimed.

Then there appeared in view a pony that seemed to be riderless at first; but the scouts understood that the redskin must be hanging on by means of a strap, and by a leg thrown over the animal's back. No doubt his face was concealed by the flowing mane of the broncho.

Hardly had this vision flashed before their eyes than a second shot forth, followed by a third. At the same time loud discordant yells began to ring out upon the air, as the Indians headed their mounts so as to come between the scouts and the tethered burros.

It was undoubtedly their intention to stam-pede the animals, and then pick them up at their leisure, an old trick with these wily sons of the plains, and which they had possibly worked many times in former raids, when off their reservation.

So it came to pass that Ned and his chums suddenly found themselves up against a proposition that they had hardly anticipated meeting when on this trip to California and the Southwest—fighting Indians just as had those old-timer Forty Niners, when crossing the prairies.

“Shoot their horses if you have to!” cried Ned, though he hated to find himself compelled to give such a cruel order; and if they wanted to save their own beasts of burden they must not flinch.

Jimmy was already banging away. He had never been known as a skillful marksman, though at times he could plant a bullet in a target. Just now he was undoubtedly so excited that he wasted considerable ammunition, though the constant cracking of his repeating rifle evidently made the red riders wary, for they sheered off a trifle in their headlong rush.

Ned waited until he could easily see a leg thrown over the back of the nearest galloping animal. It was a pretty small mark at which to shoot, and he had little hope of being able to accomplish his purpose; but fortune must have favored him, for at the crack of his Marlin a flying figure was seen to hit the ground, while the horse turning, made off, neighing wildly as it ran.

“You scotched the snake, Ned, sure you did!” shouted Jimmy. “Look at him crawl away,

would you, and draggin' a leg after him! A bully good shot, Ned. Do it some more, can't you? Knock the pins down in the other alley. Whoop!"

Jack was busy also. He had no hope of being able to hit the rider of the leading broncho, but he did think he might lame the animal so that it would not be able to continue that wild crusade.

The three young braves were taking desperate chances when they started to try and rush the camp of the scouts and raid their burro pack. Already had they paid dearly for their temerity, and Jack was yet to be heard from.

When he started firing the brave hidden behind the leading animal would start half-way up and wave his gun defiantly toward them after each useless shot. He changed his tune, however, at the third discharge of Jack's gun, for his mount was seen to suddenly stop in advance and fall over. It struggled to its feet again, and a flying figure sprang upon its back, after which the pony hobbled lamely away.

"Hoorah for us!" bellowed Jimmy, vainly trying to cover the third and last of the raiders with his wavering gun, though he had perhaps emptied the magazine in the beginning, with all those useless shots.

"Stop firing, boys!" called out Ned; "they've got enough, it seems!"

"Yes, let the rascals go," Jack added, grimly, conscious that he had done his share of the good work; "they've had a horse and a rider knocked out, and are ready to cry quits. Guess we won't be troubled any more by this bunch of thieving reds, eh, Ned?"

"All they want to do now, it seems, is to draw out the best way they can," remarked the patrol leader, as he watched the one unhurt Indian swoop down, actually snatch up the wounded brave, and then go galloping away with two riders on the back of the little stout pony.

As if to show his utter fearlessness and contempt this brave turned in his seat and sent back a defiant yell, at the same time waving his gun recklessly. But if this were done to court further marksmanship on the part of the scouts it failed in its mission, for they did not dream of making targets of fleeing enemies. It was too much like hitting an enemy after you had got him down on his back.

"Well, they're gone!" said Jack, with a grin on his face, as he patted his gun affectionately, evidently proud of the work it had recently done.

"Did you ever see the beat of it?" demanded the delighted Jimmy. "They came right in,

turned around, and walked right out again, so they did. And 'tis meself that feels very bad because everybody got a hit but me."

"Well, you helped to put a big scare in them by your shooting, and the way you yelled," Jack said, in a consoling way; but Jimmy refused to be comforted.

"Shootin' don't seem to be one of me strong points," he asserted; "though I have some of the same, I suppose."

"Yes, I could name a few," remarked Jack, pointedly; "but not wishing to make trouble I refrain. Hadn't we better fetch the burros into camp now, Ned? Those desperate reds might try again, and this time come sneaking up on foot, which would have been a smarter game right now that the one they tried."

"Yes, we don't want to take any more chances with these animals than we have to," Ned replied; "so let's lead them back. Keep quiet, you foolish thing," he added, as one of the pack animals commenced kicking furiously; "the danger's all over now."

"All but the shoutin'," added Jimmy, as another of the burros commenced to bray at a great rate; "sure, I do be thinkin' it's hallelujah he means, all on account of our gallant action in chasing the reds away. Stop that, I say, and come along peaceful and quiet now. We've

taken one big chance to lose the lot of ye and don't mean to let another ketch us nappin'. If now I hadn't happened to glimpse the rascals headin' this way, they might have run our beautiful canaries off, and then we'd be just in the same condition as before we met up with that prospector outfit."

So the four animals were led to the camp, where Harry had stood all this while deeply interested in watching this exciting little action between his scout chums and the three marauding Indians.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MAN ON THE BRONCHO

"Seems to me that we've been having about as much excitement to the square inch on this trip as any time we've struck yet," Jack announced, after they had settled their pack animals in a place close to the camp, and yet where they might manage to nibble some of the tufts of grass that abounded.

Ned had learned some time before that there was only one way to keep a burro good, and that was by giving him something to occupy his mind. As is the case with most boys, Satan seems to find some mischief for idle burros to do. And when Jack the donkey is "grubbing for grub" as Jimmy called it, his attention is wholly taken up, so that he cannot plot mischief.

"You never spoke truer words, Jack," Harry said, thoughtfully.

"And the end isn't yet," added Jimmy, with the solemn air of a prophet, or at least the seventh son of a seventh son.

"I'm wondering myself what we'll run up against next," Ned confessed, smiling as he

spoke; for somehow it seemed to strike him that they were far removed from the finish of this string of adventures.

"Well, I'll tell you what the next little affair on the programme will be," announced Jimmy, as he got up; "I'm agoin' to bait a rattlesnake like I was told the Injuns do. All of you've been sitting there wonderin' now what I was makin' this wire loop for, and I'll show you."

"Have you located one of the crawlers, then, Jimmy?" asked Ned.

"That's what I did, some time ago, but it wasn't me to tell *all* I knew," came the ready response. "Besides, he went into his hole in the rocks, which I fixed so I could shut the rogue off when I wanted. You see, I've got a stone poised just over the same, with a string tied to it. One touch of me finger and that stone drops square in the hole, and Mr. Snake can't get in when he wants. I'll step to one side now, and see if the varmint has come out again to sun himself."

A minute later and Jimmy beckoned violently to the rest. They glided over to the spot where the other scout was standing; all the while Jimmy was making motions as though he would warn them to move on their toes, so as not to alarm the sleeping snake, until he was ready to begin operations.

Yes, they could easily see the snake coiled up there on a flat rock. Just back of him there was a small black gap which doubtless led to his den.

Jimmy had his finger placed on his lips to indicate that no one must speak until he gave the word. Now he was bending over, and seeming to touch the knotted end of a string which was lying there.

It was easy to see what sort of a trap Jimmy had laid. Upon pulling gently on that same cord the stone he had poised above the hole in the rock would topple over and fill the gap, thus preventing the snake from entering when alarmed by the approach of its enemies.

Interested in this shrewd little game of Jimmy's the other boys watched to see how it would come out. When Jimmy gave a tug they saw the stone immediately fall forward and looking down at the hole in the rock it was discovered to be entirely choked with the obstruction.

Slight as the sound of the stone falling must have been, it apparently alarmed the snake, which uncoiling, started to glide toward its accustomed retreat.

"No, you don't," laughed Jimmy, as he saw the snake stop at the barrier, and apparently survey it with considerable surprise; "call again when the door's open, if you please."

He walked forward, holding a long stick in his hand. To this he had fastened the little wire hoop, with one side fashioned in a V shape. At the approach of the four boys the rattlesnake, after the custom of its species and dreading to run away, threw itself in coil like a flash, and began an angry buzzing with the rattle at the end of its tail. It was a plain warning that any one stepping on it would have cause to regret the act.

"There," said Ned, "that's just a picture of the first flag the Colonies had when they separated from the Mother Country. Paul Jones raised it aboard his vessel."

"Yes," added Jack, "I remember, and he had the motto under it, 'don't tread on me!'"

"Well, we'd be foolish to try the same," Jimmy remarked, as he started to push forward his pole with its wire noose.

The snake struck venemously at it, but without apparent difficulty even the inexperienced Jimmy was able to pass the loop over the erected head, and with a quick movement catch the rattler's neck in the small section of the same. In this fashion he had it as good as helpless; and they could readily understand how a Zuni or a Moqui brave, wishing to secure the snake alive, would be able to master it.

Of course Jimmy had no desire for a pet, and if he had he would have selected something

of which he was much more fond than a scaly monster rattler.

"One of you shoot its head off while I hold the ugly critter," he told the others; and so Jack volunteered to serve as executioner, for he thought he would like to possess that big rattle.

There was nothing doing after he fired, for he had nipped the creature's head clean off with his bullet. The trophy at the end of its tail was soon in his possession; for it is easily secured after all the fight has been taken out of its original owner, though few would care to claim it before that ceremony.

"There may be more of the things around here," Ned remarked, as he surveyed the rocky walls with their myriad of crevices.

"All right," said Jimmy, with alacrity. "I expected something like this, and that was why I gave that prospector five dollars for his horsehair lariat. Some of the rest of you may have thought I expected to learn how to throw the same after I got to the cattle ranch; mebbe I will, but right now I've got another use for it. I've read that no snake will ever crawl across a rope made of horse hair, because it tickles some. So tonight when I lay me down to sleep I expect to have this bully lariat in a circle around us all. So don't anybody bother lying

awake for fear of havin' a rattler crawl into your jacket bosom."

"You're a public benefactor, Jimmy," asserted Ned.

"We all think so, Jimmy!" added Jack, giving the other a friendly whack on his back, that made the recipient wince, but only brought out a happy grin; for Jimmy loved praise above most things.

The little incident naturally enough started them all to talking about snakes, and each tried to relate what he chanced to know concerning their habits. Harry had read many interesting things in connection with the terrible rattlesnake, for he was always dabbling in history, both of Nature and the human family.

"Now," said he, "the Indians long ago used to poison their war arrows, which were of a different type from those used in hunting; and the way they secured the virus was like this: When a big rattlesnake was located one would keep him angry while another fastened a piece of fresh venison to the end of a pole. This he was prodded with so as to make him strike it many times, and fill it full of green virus. Then the meat was allowed to get putrid, after which the flint tips of the war arrows were dipped in it and dried in the sun."

"Wow!" ejaculated Jimmy, shuddering, "and would they finish a feller if ever they struck him?"

"No matter if it was only a little wound he would be a goner," Harry assured him.

"Well, all I can say is that I'm glad they don't do the same today, because just in spite those three reds might hang around and nip us with arrows. If I've got to die young I want it to be some other way than being poisoned. That's why I hate to meet up with rattlers the worst kind. I dreamed once that I had one knock me in the leg and that it swole up as big as an elephant's. It's good I woke up just at that minute, or I believe I'd have busted."

"These snakes don't seem to be very big," remarked Harry; "nothing like the diamond-back of Florida that sometimes reaches more than five feet in length, they say, and as large around as a man's thigh."

"Huh! they're just as deadly, believe me," affirmed Jimmy.

"Every bit," added Ned; "and this one seems to be of a different breed from the still smaller rattlesnake found living with the marmots or prairie dogs in their colonies and burrows, along with owls."

"I've got a pair of slippers made of snake-skin," Jack observed; "but I didn't kill the reptile myself. A friend brought the skin back from the South after he had spent a winter there. He said the beast had struck a colored man, who was saved only with great difficulty."

"Can anybody live after being struck by a rattler?" asked Jimmy, eagerly.

"Lots of people have been saved by prompt attention," Ned ventured to say, "while many have died in terrible agony. All sorts of remedies and cures have been tried, but I've always made up my mind that an ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure when it comes to a rattler's bite."

"Now, they say that these queer Moqui and Zuni Indians, the cliff dwellers, must know of something that makes them immune against snake poison," Harry told them, drawing from his broad fund of knowledge gained through much reading; "because they handle the varmints by the dozen, curl them around their necks, and put them in their clothes without the least fear."

"Bet you now they've drawn the poison fangs first, and made them harmless," Jimmy up and declared.

"People used to think that way," Harry informed him, "until the matter was investigated by some scientific man, who found that it wasn't so. The snakes were just as deadly as ever. Perhaps those who handle them are snake-charmers, who know how to keep them from being ugly. Either that, or else they've gone and inoculated themselves with some weed, and don't mind being punctured a bit."

"Well," Jimmy wound up by saying, "I only hope we get to that Colorado canyon you talk about so much, for I'd like to glue my lamps on a queer sight like that. And Harry, let's make up our minds that we'll try and find out what it is the Indians use. Think of the many lives it'd save, if we only could tell."

"A word you used makes me remember that there's still a third tribe of the same kind of Indians who practice the snake dance, the Hopis. Like as not they all come from the same lot of cliff-dwellers in the old days before the white man ever saw this country of ours."

Passing the time away with this sort of talk the boys saw the long afternoon begin to draw near its close. None of them were sorry, though feeling very comfortable in that fairly decent camp. Jimmy would of course be happier could he feel sure that there were no other crawlers near by, ready to pay them a visit as they slept. He was seen several times to be laying his new horse hair lariat on the ground, and passing his hand caressingly over it, as though desirous of ascertaining the element said to keep snakes from crossing. Did he but know it an ordinary rope would have answered the same purpose, and the Texans only used the one made of horse hair because that was their favorite lariat.

Ned and Jack were seated close together,

and the former had been engaged in rubbing up the field glasses, which from frequent handling had become a trifle blurred, so far as the powerful lens were concerned.

Perhaps it was just incidentally that Jack leaned forward, and picking them up after Ned was through with the cleaning operation, adjusted them to his eyes, and commenced to look this way and that.

Hearing his chum give a sudden grunt Ned at once turned his eyes upon him, to see Jack hastily thrusting the glasses toward him as he exclaimed:

"Hurry, Ned, and glimpse him before he gets out of range! Over that way, up the ridge where we haven't been! A man on horseback, and a white man too! He saw me looking his way, and all at once struck his pony and hit up a hot pace for cover. Get him yet, Ned?"

"Yes, I am watching him," replied the other scout quickly.

"Whatever'd'yethink makes him want to scoot that way for, just like he thought we might be a pirate bunch, and would try to pot him with our long-range rifles before he could get out of reach. See him duck his head, Ned! Now he's darted back of that cover, and we won't glimpse him in a hurry again. Whew! he was going lick-etty-split, the last I saw of him."

Ned took down the glasses and turned a puzzled face upon his comrade.

"Don't look as if you'd guessed the answer yet, eh, Ned?" continued Jack, who had become so accustomed to having the scout leader solve riddles that he seemed to expect an immediate explanation.

"Well, he was a white man, and no Indian, to start with," remarked Ned.

"Every time, because I could see his face, and he wore a beard. Besides his clothes belonged to a white man. Indians dress different, even when civilized. Now, we happen to know there are reds around this part of the country; you don't imagine he took us for that kind of trash, do you?"

"Not unless he was a fool," came the ready response. "And only a couple of hours back we made enough racket with our guns and whooping to be heard a mile or two away. Perhaps he was looking for some explanation of that row? Perhaps, if he is a miner, and has struck it rich somewhere around these Telescope Mountains, he doesn't want strangers to trail him."

"That sounds like it might be the real thing," commented Jack after apparently rolling Ned's words around in his brain, so as to view them from various angles. "It's just what most men would do if they had struck a good thing."

Nobody wants to share their fortune with strangers. Well, it isn't at all likely that the scouts will bother trying to look him and his crowd up. But I would like to know if they are responsible for all that noise."

The others, seeing that something of importance had engaged the attention of Ned and Jack now came up, with questions on their lips and in their eyes. So they were duly told of what had occurred. Jimmy seemed to think that Ned had hit on the true solution of the matter, while Harry indulged in more or less speculating regarding it. He even hinted pretty strongly that they might see something more of the man on the broncho if, as he suspected, the other turned out to be one of those lawless spirits who have been driven to the wilds by the pursuit of justice.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE STRANGE SOUND AGAIN.

"How about standing watch tonight?" Jimmy asked, after they had finished their supper, and were lying around taking things easy.

"Yes, ought we to take a trick turn about, Ned, do you think?" added Jack.

"Of course there's always some danger, with thieving Indians around," the leader replied, thoughtfully; "but I've been watching that oldest burro, and it strikes me that he's one of those smart donkeys taught to warn his master if anything suspicious comes around."

"Well now, I like that," Jimmy remarked, sitting up to take another and more careful look at the animal in question, a shaggy old cruiser that had apparently seen considerable service in the prospecting line and knew the ropes well. "D'ye mean to tell me, Ned, that if a greasy red came sneakin' around our camp that old buster would give you a punch and try his best to let you know?"

"Hardly that, Jimmy," chuckled the scout master, "but I do believe he would try all he

knew how to give warning, because some former master taught him how to do the same. I remember how he was snorting and stamping with his hoofs on the ground at the time the Indians were coming up; and it was the same thing with Teddy when we glimpsed that strange horseman. He must have scented him even before Jack got his first peep through the glasses."

"Then all we have to do is to lie down and go to sleep as peacefully as the babes in the woods; is that it, Ned?" Jimmy wanted to know.

"Just drop off and don't let anything bother us, Jimmy," Jack announced.

"And of course we must tell ourselves before we do this to keep our ears tuned up so as to grab a note of warning, like the stamping of a burro," Harry added, as his contribution to the stock of knowledge.

"All I can say then," remarked Jimmy, "is that we got our money's worth when we bought that Teddy. He's a jewel if ever there was one in the shaggy coat of a pack burro. And after this I'm going to cultivate his acquaintance more. I just bet you he's seen a heap of action in his day, if only he could talk."

"Study up the donkey language, Jimmy," advised Jack, with a broad grin; "and then

just think of the fine times you could have chinning with him between meals. Why, life would be one long picnic with you, my boy."

So they chatted on, and the time passed until Jimmy began his usual yawning programme, which always made the others realize that they too were sleepy.

Ned and Jack fixed things so that the four burros were roped close to where the scouts meant to sleep. The boys experimented by lying flat on the ground, and learned that they could readily hear the stamp of hoofs when the animals chose to make such a sound.

"I think it's going to work all right, Ned," was the verdict Jack gave, after the experiments had been concluded.

Ned himself was quite satisfied, as he lay down in his blanket, that should the wise old burro give the alarm at any time during the night he would surely find himself aroused.

It was really not his intention to drop off to sleep as quickly as the rest, for truth to tell Ned had secretly planned to keep a private little watch of his own. This was not because he expected visitors, for he fancied that those Indian braves must have learned a lesson when they burned their fingers in trying to steal the pack animals of the scouts. There was another reason why Ned wished to remain awake as long as he possibly could.

He had not forgotten the mysterious explosion that for two weeks or more, according to the prospector, had been happening about every night—just once and no more.

Ned felt that he would like very much to be awake should it happen again, in order to form some sort of conclusion about its origin. Like most boys he disliked to be baffled by any kind of a mystery; and the sooner he satisfied his curiosity with regard to that strange happening the better it would be for his peace of mind.

It was easy enough at first, because he found scores of things to think about; but after a while his eyes grew heavier, and he found himself yawning almost as fiercely as Jimmy always did.

He did not himself know when he dropped off, but it was with his head resting on the ground, as he had planned, so that any sort of unusual sound was bound to awaken him.

When the crash and terrific roll did come Ned sat up like a jack-in-the-box released after the catch of the lid was touched. He was clear-eyed and had his senses about him. This was proved by the way he instantly cast his attention in the direction from whence he had anticipated the heavy booming sound would spring, if it came at all that night.

The others were fumbling with their blankets while Ned was sitting erect and using his eyes. On this account when he saw what they failed

to catch—a vivid flash of lightning, as it seemed, which must have accompanied the peal of thunder; just as the crash of a battleship's monster gun would go with a blinding glare if the discharge came in the night time.

It was all over in a second, and the darkness seemed more appalling than ever to the boy; yet he exulted in the belief that he had really made a discovery calculated later on to have some bearing on the solution of the puzzle.

“And it came from over there, too,” Ned was whispering to himself, as he sat and kept his eyes glued upon a certain spot; “where we know lies the Valley of Death.”

He was given no time to do any more figuring. The others had started grumbling at being disturbed in their rest, and were now sitting up, rubbing their eyes in a fashion that plainly told how they had seen nothing of that strange flash.

Jimmy being a hard sleeper was only half awake. His grumbling soon took the shape of actual complaining.

“If that burro made all that noise, Ned, sure he must have croaked. But I don't see any of you gettin' your guns ready to shoot, so mebber it was only a false alarm. Think *I'll* drop over and take another little snooze. Wake me if there's anything excitin' comin' over the wire, will you, Ned?”

Jimmy's voice trailed off as soon as his head struck the blanket again and Ned knew he was already pretty far gone. It took considerable to get Jimmy fully aroused, though the odor of coffee or the aroma of bacon generally accomplished this miracle.

Jack and Harry were not very curious, because they, too, felt sleepy.

"Same old business, wasn't it?" the former asked. "Some miners firing their regular nightly blast, just like that prospector told us. And I suppose we'll be bothered with that booming every night we stick around this hot old section. But let me tell you they must be using big charges of powder, the way the ground shakes when it lets go."

"And wasn't it just like sleepy Jimmy," Harry added, trying to laugh, although ending in a big yawn, "to think it was that burro giving the alarm. Look at him as sound asleep as if there wasn't an Indian in the whole country. Don't I wish I could forget my troubles that way."

Judging from the fact that about five minutes afterwards Ned could hear Harry and Jack breathing heavily and regularly, he considered that they might be classed along with Jimmy; for they had certainly gone to sleep as though confident that *some one* would watch over the camp. But then Ned was accustomed to having

burdens of this kind placed upon his shoulders; a scout master must not only assume his own duties but part of others belonging to those under him. It is this responsibility that makes him what he is.

There were no further alarms.

Morning found them in full possession of all their outfit. Undoubtedly the warm reception given to the three young braves had taught them a severe lesson; and they must have lost all desire to run up against these wideawake scouts again. With a wounded comrade to look after, and a crippled pony in the bargain, they doubtless considered it policy to start back again to their reservation, and play at being good once more.

After that fine stretch of sound sleep Jimmy was feeling unusually bright on this particular morning.

"Strikes me that our luck must have changed right-about-face, boys," he was saying while helping to get the morning meal ready, though the eastern sky was only beginning to show the approach of the sun.

"Glad you think so, Jimmy," Harry remarked; "because you claim to be something of a weather prophet, and perhaps you can read our destiny in the stars, too. Time we did strike a break in the hard luck. We've run up against some pretty tough times lately,

you remember. But once we get on the other side of that valley and it's going to be plain sailing, eh, Ned?"

"Ought to be, I should think," was the non-committal answer given by the leader of the expedition.

"And I reckon now," added Jimmy, "that all this present hurry means we want to be as far on our way as we can when that big ball of fire gets doing business at the old stand."

"You've guessed it, Jimmy," Jack told him. "The further along we can push, the less we'll have to suffer in that hole they give such a bad name to, and which all of us are just bound to see for ourselves, after coming this far."

"Huh! I don't believe it's goin' to amount to much after all," Jimmy commented. "One thing sure, if it beats that scorcher of a Mojave Desert we crossed it's got to be a corker, believe me. If I'd only had an egg along I'd be able to tell the greatest yarn ever about cooking it without a fire. But there don't happen to be any Columbus Avenue delicatessen stores along this way, so it's impossible to buy hen fruit. That's always the way when I want to try out an experiment—something is missing, and all my high-brow thinking goes up in smoke."

"Well, you'd better watch that bacon closer, let me tell you," warned Harry, "or it'll take

fire and go up in smoke, too, which you won't like, I'm thinking."

"That would be a calamity, for sure," muttered Jimmy; and after that he gave his undivided attention to what he was doing, looking to getting breakfast for the crowd ready.

Jimmy liked to talk, but he loved to eat, and when it came to choosing between the two he could close up and be as dumb as an oyster.

As they sat around and ate that meal the day was coming on. Away over in the far east the heavens grew more rosy as the sun came closer to the horizon; and boys though they were, Ned and his companions could express their admiration for the glory that heralded the approach of the day king.

At the same time they would have been ten times happier could they have found the heavens covered with vaporous clouds that would screen them from the terrible rays of the sun as he mounted toward the zenith.

Of course they knew that the source of all that frightful heat did not lie in the one fact that the sky was always clear. The shady desert lay low, so that cooling winds seldom blew across it; and even when the air was stirred violently one of those sand storms resulted, which made conditions more unendurable than during a calm. And then it was reflected heat that caused much of the suffering; just as all of them

had experienced it in a mild way when walking down Broadway of an August day, with the pavements feeling hot underfoot.

As soon as they had satisfied their hunger preparations were started looking to an immediate departure. Perhaps Ned may have had some doubts as to the wisdom of the course they had mapped out; but he himself was young and sanguine, and besides, as he often said, in matters of this kind majority generally ruled with himself and companions, so that the responsibility for the daring advance rested on all their shoulders.

The burros were duly loaded with their packs, so that the scouts could travel quite free from burdens. This was going to make things much easier, all of them admitted; for a blanket and a gun become very troublesome when one is exposed to the hot rays of the tropical sun on a sandy stretch of desert for hours at a time. Jimmy had been heard to complain that he would begrudge carrying a house fly needlessly at such a time.

"All ready!" announced Jack, when he had gone over the fastenings of the packs carefully for the last time.

"Sure we haven't left anything?" queried Jimmy, peering this way and that, as if it would be an unpardonable sin should it later on develop

that they had forgotten so much as the butt end of a well-used side of bacon.

"It's all right," Ned told him, and with that he was content.

"There's the old chap looking at us!" Jack announced, as the little troop started forth, and pointing as he spoke to where the sun could be seen peeping above the low horizon.

Jimmy shook a fist in that direction.

"His room would be appreciated better than his company, I'm thinkin'," he hinted; "and if the old sinner could only take a broad hint he wouldn't inflict himself on us the whole day. Just the sight of him makes me begin to feel warm under the collar."

"Well, cool off then, Jimmy," cautioned Jack, "because we've got ten or twelve hours ahead of us today, and long before another night we'll be apt to know some things about this wonderful Death Valley that we never read in books."

All of them seemed to be feeling in the best of trim that morning of the start from the foot of Telescope Range. Even Harry had recovered from the slight injury to his ankle, and declared that he no longer experienced the least pain.

Ned had a pretty good idea they would find abundant need for all the stamina they could summon before the end of the journey was reached. Some inward monitor seemed to tell

him that this move was possibly the most reckless one which they had ever undertaken as scouts. And yet, so queerly are boys made, that given the chance to back out, even without displaying anything like cowardice, and probably Ned would have declined to avail himself of the opportunity.

With their departure that morning the die was cast, either for good or evil, and they must go through with the experience.

CHAPTER XV.

IN DEATH VALLEY.

“Whew!”

Jimmy mopped his red face with his big bandana handkerchief, which he was wearing cowboy fashion loosely knotted around this neck.

Ned and Jack and Harry did not start to make fun of him when he gave this tremendous sigh. They were feeling about the same way themselves, truth to tell; and Jimmy really voiced their united sentiments.

“Somebody say it’s hot, and relieve me feelings,” Jimmy went on, as he gave the bandana a deft twist in order to wring some of the moisture out of it; “because it might be I was deceivin’ myself. Before I thought I was bein’ baked, but now I’m just as sure I’m next door to boiled.”

“That’s just it,” declared Harry, “it’s an entirely different sort of heat here to any we’ve met up with before. The humidity must be awful, to make us ooze like we do. If it gets

much worse I'll trickle away, and you won't find anything of me but a grease spot."

"Look at the burros, would you?" Jack remarked.

"They certainly don't seem to be very happy just now, with their long ears flapping, or hanging down dejectedly, as if the animals knew what they were up against, and felt ready to give up hope," Harry observed.

"Oh! don't take their actions too seriously," advised Ned. "I've asked lots of questions about the breed of pack animal they have in this country, and everybody seems to agree that they're as cunning as a red fox. They make believe to be weak when you're loading up the pack; and they even inflate their bodies, so you have to give them a sly kick in order to get the ropes tight."

"But what would they do that for?" asked Jimmy.

"Don't you see," Jack told him, quickly, as though glad of the chance to air his superior knowledge, "the cunning rascal knows that if he can inflate himself when the pack is put on it will be easy to slip it off just when he can let it drop over the first precipice the train comes to. No experienced packer ever finishes his job without kicking the burro several times to make him collapse. It might look cruel, but it's part of the programme. And chances are

these animals of ours don't feel the heat half as much as they let on."

"'Tis tricky eyes they have, to be sure," Jimmy admitted; "and that old Teddy is the worst of the lot. Give you my word, fellers, if he didn't wink his off eye at me right now; and I bet you he knows every word we say."

"All right then," declared Jack, "he'll understand me when I say that we're no greenhorns, but old experienced travelers, and tricks don't go with us. Let him do his duty right and we'll treat him decently; but I've cut a stout stick, and if he gets too funny, or tries to slip that pack, I'm bound to use the same on his back. Tell me if he winked that off eye again when I said that, Jimmy."

"He shut the both of them, so he did;" Jimmy solemnly affirmed; "and 'tis meself that would give something to know what he meant. But Ned, don't we stop for a rest about this time? It must be close to the middle of the day, and the worst is yet to come. Go easy with us, won't you? Order up a gallon of ice cream, and have it charged to Jack here."

"I'd willingly pay for it six times over if that would do any good," assented the other scout, as he fanned himself with his campaign hat, and then hastily replaced it on his exposed head, evidently fearing the effect of that blistering sun on his bare skin.

"How far have we come, do you think, Ned?" asked Harry, after they had driven the stakes deep into the sand, so that the burros might not take a notion to stray away while the noon-time rest was on.

They did not look as though they would make the slightest exertion without being forced; but Ned had learned considerable about such animals, and that on occasion they would run away, given half a chance.

"We are now undoubtedly on the border of Death Valley," Ned answered, so promptly that it was evident he had been giving more or less consideration to the subject before Harry put the question to him.

"I guessed as much," Harry continued, smoothly, "because the conditions have gradually but surely been changing for some time now, as well as the character of the oppressive heat."

Now Jimmy had not bothered his head a particle along these lines. He only knew that his discomfort was greater than at any other time, and this had finally caused him to break out in lamentations, with a desire to make a temporary halt, in order to rest the pack animals, and themselves in the bargain.

On hearing this important announcement, however, he did deign to cast a curious look to the right and to the left, as well as ahead. He

knew only too well what lay behind, and hence did not bother turning round.

"Well, now, that's some interestin' to be sure," he muttered, as he looked; "and so we're on the border land of that beastly stretch we've read and heard so much about. What do I think of it? To be honest with you, fellers, I don't like it for thirty cents."

They were all in the same boat apparently. The prospect did not appeal to them as one that possessed the least bit of beauty, with that same copper-colored sky overhead, the sun shining pitilessly down, and in every direction nothing but that white sand to reflect the heat.

"I think I can see some trees away over yonder!" said Jack; "let me have your glasses, Ned. I'd like to know if it could be another of those splendid oases, for in that case we could spend the night there."

They listened in vain to hear a cheery word fall from Jack's lips after he had levelled the glasses upon the distant object.

"You don't seem to feel very joyful over the prospect?" Harry commented.

"Guess you won't either after you take a look," grumbled the other, with an expression of bitter disappointment on his face, while he handed Harry the field glasses.

Jimmy waited expectantly, under the impression that while Jack had not taken the trouble

to relate what he had seen the other scout might be more accommodating.

"They are trees, all right," said Harry, "but such bare skeletons. I never saw a more dismal outlook. Makes me think of a graveyard. What are those black things dotting them all over? There! one moved just now, and I do believe they must be buzzards or vultures or something of the kind, birds that feed on carrion. Honest, now, they just seem to fit in the desolate picture. It's enough to make your flesh creep. Perhaps they're waiting for us!"

"Make him stop saying things like that, Ned, when we feel bad enough, as it is!" Jimmy exclaimed; "but while we're taking this noon rest it mightn't be a bad thing to refresh ourselves with just a few bites. Nothing like keeping your strength up to the right notch, you know; and you've got to eat to do that."

He was the only one of the party who seemed willing to bother with opening the pack that held the hard-tack and cheese. The rest felt the intense heat to such an extent that they did not care whether they ever partook of a meal again. Of course this would change immediately they found some relief; but it would have to be even hotter than they found it on the border of Death Valley for Jimmy to neglect

the call to battle. He was always ready for the fray.

It was a very depressing scene, and yet it struck Jack as worth the exertion of getting out his little camera and striking off a picture. In days to come they might like to look back to this occasion; and there is nothing equal to having a good snapshot when trying to recall past events.

So Jack got his focus, and the others tried to assume such postures as would most likely convey the impression that it was pretty torrid around that part of Uncle Sam's dominions. Harry vowed that the perspiration stood out in such huge beads on his forehead while he posed for his picture, that a magnifying glass, if the photograph turned out to be a true one, must disclose them looking like miniature mountains.

"What can that fierce white thing be away over there?" Jack asked, while they lay under a shelter made from their blankets, and which helped in a measure to keep the sun's concentrated rays from smiting them.

"I've been looking at it through the glasses," Ned told him; "and the best I can say is that it seems to be some sort of deposit, perhaps borax, or soda, or something like that. You know such things are often found in desert

places; in fact, so far as I understand it, they're never run across in any other spot."

"Huh! we haven't lost any borax that I know of," said Jimmy, who, when he found that it was nothing good to eat, lost all interest in the discovery made by Jack; had they told him it might be a deposit of soda crackers the case would have assumed quite a different aspect in his eyes.

"But see here," Harry remarked, soon afterwards, "if we're only on the brink of this Death Valley right now, we can't expect to rush across it by night, can we?"

"Not unless you spread a pair of wings like the buzzards, and take a soar," Jack took it upon himself to declare.

"Well, then, we'll have to pitch a camp tonight in the heart of this desolate region we've heard so much talk about," continued Harry; "and that was what we heard the prospector say he never would do under any circumstances, because he believed there were all sorts of deadly misamatic vapors that were set free after the cool of night succeeded the intense heat of the day. He said he felt sure it must be something like that caused so many to die when caught in the valley."

"But you don't believe that, do you, Ned?" Jimmy urged, showing signs of uneasiness, and eyeing Harry in a dubious way, as though

he more than half fancied the other might be simply saying these things in order to excite his fears.

"There may be some truth in it," Ned replied, slowly; "for all persons who have been in the strange valley say that it seems to have a heavy atmosphere at night, far more to be feared than the awful heat of the day. But I've asked all sorts of questions to find out what ought to be done, and I don't think we need be alarmed. Other people have camped in the valley, and lived to tell the tale; so I guess scouts ought to be able to do the same. We'll take all sorts of precautions about breathing properly, and keep our faces away from the ground as much as possible."

"They say that if you breathe only through your nose you stand a much less chance of contracting any serious disease," Jack observed, as he gave Jimmy a quick look, "and I reckon that would apply in a case like this, too."

"It's a wise plan," Ned agreed.

"Then tell Jimmy about it," Jack continued; "and ask him to hunt up the button he uses when he sleeps without snoring, because it's going to lengthen his life to keep it busy working."

Jimmy was dozing by now, and only grunted his disdain at this cruel little fling. Indeed, the heat made them all feel drowsy, and so

Ned declared that it might be a good thing if they could take a short nap, since delay only allowed the sun to pass the meridian and begin his westward march.

None of them were at all lively about making ready to start when the order was given some time later. They moved as though their feet were shod with lead; and indeed it took more or less shaking and argument to get Jimmy to rouse himself at all.

"I don't see why we couldn't knock off the bundles," he complained, "and ride on the backs of the burros ourselves."

"Yes, you're a nice one to say that," Jack told him; "wake up and use your head to do a little thinking. What would happen when night came, and you felt that you'd give everything you owned for that Navajo blanket? And then how about abandoning our food supplies—who'd do the biggest howl when you felt the grip of hunger, and never a bite to meet it with? If I used such terrible language as you do, Jimmy, d'ye know what I'd say now? That you're only talking through your hat!"

"Guess I was," admitted the other, weakly; "but that nap must a near foundered me. Didn't seem able to get a grip on things, you see. But I'm all right now; and of course I'm the last one to say drop off the loads.

I hope to live to diminish what 's in them packs a whole lot."

How the minutes dragged along, and what tortures those adventurous lads suffered weak words could never describe. The one fortunate thing they could look to for temporary relief was the water supply. That was bountiful for all purposes; and after their one sad lesson the scouts were mindful to keep a jealous eye of all the casks and other receptacles which they had secured from the prospector at the time they purchased part of the outfit.

They kept track of the sun's slow descent toward the horizon as though they even feared that another miracle had been wrought, this time without any Joshua and that the blazing orb was standing still in the western heavens, determined to complete the task of overpowering their puny frames, already taxed to the limit of endurance.

Never were boys one half so glad when a day drew near its close; and it would be one that could not be forgotten, no matter what stirring scenes Ned, Jack, Harry and Jimmy might look upon in other fields of adventure.

"Thank goodness! it can't be long now!" groaned Jack, when the sun was near the level of the mysterious place where earth and sky seemed to meet.

"And if we can hold out through the coming night, will we be able to make the riffle tomorrow, d'ye think, Ned?" asked Jimmy.

"I have every reason to believe so," the scout master told him. "My chart may not be as exact as I'd like, because no real survey has ever been taken of this region; but from all I've heard I reckon we must be more than a third of the way through the valley right now. And as darkness comes along so quick after sunset, we might as well begin soon to get settled. There are quite a few things to be done that may add to our comfort, not to mention our safety. And I don't think anybody will object when I give the order to halt."

"Just try us, that's all," muttered Jimmy; "I'm as thirsty as a fish again, and must have a chance to wet my throat. Seems like water is gettin' more necessary to keep me alive than I ever thought. I could swim in it all day long, to cool off!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE DANCING STAR.

All of them felt nervous about spending a night there in the midst of such utter desolation. They made out not to believe there could be any real truth in the many terrible stories told about the clutch of the miasma that came creeping along the valley in the dead of night, strangling every living thing that had the misfortune or hardihood to trespass upon the forbidden territory. At the same time they were human enough to feel a sensation akin to awe, as they stood there watching the red sun sinking below the mysterious horizon; and how could they help mentally speculating as to what chance they had of seeing his familiar disc again when another morning dawned?

Ned saw the condition his chums were in and as usual he crushed down his own feelings in order to cheer the others up.

They had little to offer the poor burros for a meal, save that from the prospectors they had purchased some corn which, saved for this occasion, would keep the animals from feeling

actually starved. But then no doubt they had fasted before now, and knew what it meant. In another day or two the boys hoped to be in another sort of country, where they might find pasturage of some kind.

Ned was as good as his word, and he insisted on forming some sort of tent cover from the strips of old canvas that had been secured when they bought their supplies, so as to wrap the bundles in.

This is not so difficult a task for scouts who had been through many sieges, and learned along the lines of sheer necessity how to manage.

"I've got a sort of idea," Ned informed them, "that if there's anything in these stories about the deadly night air here, it comes from sleeping in the open, like most men would likely do. Being under shelter isn't going to hurt us, and it may be a great help."

Of course they had no camp fire, because there was nothing to be found in the way of fuel. Jimmy lamented the fact every little while. He even took out the coffee, and bent his head over so as to inhale its fragrance, then sighed dismally as he felt constrained to put it away again.

"That's the worst of this desert business," he complained; "you have to miss so many of the pleasures of life. What's grub without coffee, tell me?"

"Oh! well," said Jack, complacently, "nobody's going to force it down your throat, like you're a suffragette on a hunger strike. Please yourself about that; only if you start a fast there'll be the more for the rest of us."

Nobody took any threats Jimmy might make seriously, especially when they were connected with giving up eating. They knew only too well that when he did that the last hope of his remaining on this earth would have fled. Some people might say "while there's life there's hope," but Jimmy would have changed this to "while there's life there's eats!"

When, after night had set in, and they began to feel just a trifle more refreshed, the food supply was investigated, and some of them started to munching what was doled out. Jimmy was there "on the job" as usual, and he seemed to be enjoying his repast as much as the rest, despite the absence of the coffee.

"We've gone and heard a whole lot about the lurking deadly perils of this same queer valley," Jack remarked between bites, "but so far I haven't caught on to the origin of such a hot hole. How do they think it ever happened? Did our old earth ever knock up against a comet and get punched so hard as to have this dent made in this particular side? Seems to me I read one story that went like that."

"Oh! all sorts of wild theories have been exploded about this freak of a place," Ned explained; "and to this day I don't believe it's really been settled for keeps what its origin was."

"But while we're here we might as well know some things about it, Ned; and tell us what you think," Jack continued.

"Harry and I have talked it over," the scout master explained; "for you know he's read even more than I have about the strange things to be found in the Southwest. We believe it must have been a lake at some time away back; and that a convulsion of Nature freed the water, and, it might be, sent it into the Colorado River. Ever since that remotest time the sun has beat down day after day on the sand, and made it the awful place it is."

"How about the volcano idea we heard mentioned in Los Angeles?" asked Jack; and at that Jimmy suddenly stopped eating, for it was the first mention he had heard of this theory, since he had not been present on the occasion Jack referred to.

"That's never been proved, so far as I know," Ned admitted. "There are some who say plenty of evidences may be found going to show that ages ago this section was volcanic, and that some fearful upheavals must have taken place, during one of which this long valley between the Tele-

scope and Panamint Mountains and the Amargosa River was scooped out by an explosion, the worst this world has ever known."

"Great Scott!" Jimmy was heard to gasp. "Why didn't you tell me about that same before? Mebbe I'd have elected to stay there in Los Angeles, and let the rest of you try your luck. Earthquakes are bad enough; but when it comes to volcanoes throwin' out red hot lava, and stones as big as a barn, I begin to scratch gravel.

But they knew better, and that nothing could have kept Jimmy from accompanying the rest of the scouts. Jimmy often said things that sounded strange, but when you knew his ways, and had the key to his nature, these little matters could be set down as mere vaporings.

Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, poisonous fumes, burning sands, scorching sun-rays, deadly rattlesnakes, and all other sorts of objectionable features might bar his path; but if the other fellows were foolish enough to brave them, Jimmy would be found in line when the count was taken.

"Too bad there don't seem to be a single tree handy, Jimmy, in case the worst comes," Jack remarked, in a pretended sympathetic tone, as he saw the other scout looking about him as though disappointed.

"Oh! I wasn't thinkin' about *trees*," Jimmy immediately declared; "because, you know, I've been considerin' that business since the last time. I've come to the conclusion there wouldn't be any use in my tryin' to keep from being engulfed by an earthquake, if the ground opened, even I was huggin' the biggest tree you ever saw. And I reckon now it'd be about as bad with volcano spoutin' out brimstone and lava, and dornicks as big as City Hall, together with miles and miles of ashes. So I'm resignin' myself to the worst if it should come. The only comfort I find at all is the fact that I'll have good company when I go up."

"That's a sensible way of looking at it, Jimmy," was Ned's comment. "What can't be cured must be endured."

"You all know I'd kick and fight and yell with the rest if there was any chance to break even," Jimmy went on; "but once you understand you're up against it good and hard, why, what's the use? Like the old Injuns when they was bein' tortured at the stake, you just have to grin and bear it. A laugh helps out heaps sometimes. That's why I seem so merry; it's to hide an aching heart."

They mocked him at that, for the idea of such a happy-go-lucky fellow as Jimmy McGraw having a hidden sorrow was too comical for anything.

It was just as well that they could for the time being forget the fearsome conditions by which they were surrounded, and appear to be merry, even if secretly their hearts felt heavy with a dread that none of them could have expressed in words, even had he wanted to do so.

Harry was casting furtive looks around him from time to time, just as though he half expected to see some phantom shape loom up out of the darkness and threaten them with sudden disaster.

He confided his fears to Ned, when he happened to find a chance to speak without either of the other two chums overhearing him.

"I don't know how it is, Ned," Harry went on to say, solemnly; "but there's such a queer and unearthly feeling in this air I just keep on half expecting to see some monster that used to live before the flood come creeping along—a dinasaurus or something like that, perhaps seventy or a hundred feet long, and looking worse than any seven-headed dragon you ever saw on a Chinese banner. All sorts of yarns are told about this valley, you know. Some men swear they saw such monsters here, and that they belong to a long past age. Such things have been dug out of the earth; mastodons have been found imbedded in the ice where they've lain just like that for thousands of years back, every hair in place. But here

in Death Valley they say you can run across the same breed alive! Why, they even claim that's the reason so many gold hunters have never been heard of again after starting in here—that they've furnished a square meal for these prehistoric reptiles."

"Well, anybody can believe just as much or as little as they please of that hot stuff," Ned remarked; "but sensible fellows like you and me would have to be shown before we took any stock in such fearful lies. But I will say this, and go on record, that if there's any place on the face of the globe where such monsters *might* be found alive, I do believe it would be right here in this Death Valley."

"But Ned, what if we should have the luck to run across one, and get it for a prize? Think of the glory we'd win, and what fame it would bring our troop. Now, there's that awful yawp we've listened to on several nights; mind, I'm not saying I believe it to be so, but if there is any such hundred foot lizard here, and he took a notion to make a noise, I rather think it would run along the line of the thunder clap we heard."

"He'd have to be a thousand foot reptile, in my estimation, to make the earth tremble as it did, whenever he chose to give tongue," said Ned. "But Harry, let me give you a little advice."

"Always glad to accept it from you, Ned."

"Forget all you've been saying to me, do you hear," the scout master continued.

"You mean that I mustn't mention it to Jimmy and Jack, particularly Jimmy?"

"Yes, that's about what I mean," Ned told him. "We've got all the trouble we want to carry with us, as it is, and to conjure up a lot of new terrors would make Jimmy very unhappy."

"All right, I'll sew my lips together, or else just forget there ever was such a reptile in all this world like a dinasaurus. If one does drop in on us we could see how modern arms and soft-nosed bullets that mushroom when they strike can go up against the armor of a hundred-foot lizard. I thought I ought to tell you about these things while they were on my mind. But I'm glad you don't take any stock in the yarns. And I feel better from having told you."

In other words, Harry was as much as confessing that he himself had been considerably worried because of these wonderful Arabian Nights stories coming back to his mind when he found himself surrounded by all those gruesome elements that go to make Death Valley the notorious place it has always been.

As usually happened, a little heart-to-heart talk with the scout master served to make things look differently; and he even felt cheerful as he

prepared his blanket for a more or less feverish rest.

"One thing sure," Jimmy was saying to Jack, as the others joined the pair, "we don't need to bother ourselves about keepin' watch now; and Teddy's already layin' down, as if he just knew there wasn't any chance of strangers findin' us here. As to the wolves and coyotes, they don't do much of their huntin' in Death Valley, I reckon."

"Hadn't we better give the animals some more water before we turn in?" asked Harry; "they seem to be making queer sounds, it strikes me; which I certainly hope won't keep up long, because I couldn't think of trying to go to sleep with that choking noise so close by."

"Luckily we've got plenty of water," said Ned, "and the rogues must know it, too. Mark my words, that if you crept over there you would likely find Teddy teaching the other three pack burros how to grunt and heave groans that way, just to excite our sympathy. That old rascal knows more than any donkey I ever saw. But we can't refuse them all the water they can drink, seeing that they carried the same this far."

That he had guessed the true meaning of all those odd sounds was evident when they heard no more after Teddy, and likewise the

other three pack animals, had been given a good drink.

"Oh! don't I wish this night was over!" Jimmy said for the tenth time, as, this task having been completed, they sat around again trying to keep fairly comfortable, though in that steaming furnace such a thing was next to impossible of accomplishment.

"And I'd like to give you a dose of sleeping powders, if it would keep you still for a few hours," Jack vehemently declared. "I want to drop off to sleep myself the worst kind, and you won't let me, with your eternal squawk. It's hard enough to get your breath in this burning sahara, let alone be kept awake against your will. Now, be good, Jimmy, and see if you can't keep your teeth fast together for ten minutes. I calculate it might take me just all of that to get fairly settled."

"Well," said Jimmy, "I'm going to lie down myself when that star over there gets twinkling on the horizon, and then dips over the edge. That ought to be in something like ten minutes, I take it. Hi! what the dickens! Hello! Ned, Jack, I told you we'd find something upside-down in this terrible valley. Why, even the stars have taken to playin' leap frog. There's that one I said I'd watch, but hey, look at it movin' right along now before your very eyes, like it meant to elope. Am I getting looney,

or is that star swingin' along like everything right now?"

Aroused by Jimmy's complaint and strange assertion the other three boys once more sat up and looked in the direction where Jimmy seemed to have his gaze riveted. What they saw gave them a queer sensation, a sort of creepy feeling, as if, just as he claimed, the most common every-day things were apt to get out of focus in this wonderful Death Valley, and appear to be next door to miracles.

CHAPTER XVII.

UP IN THE AIR.

There were multitudes of well behaved stars shining up there in the heavens, and apparently only bent upon following their appointed duties. These did not rivet the attention of Ned and the other scouts.

In the midst of these there was one little glow that seemed to have developed a new wrinkle; for instead of moving majestically westward, to finally vanish from sight beyond the horizon, this star was doing all sorts of queer "stunts," as Jimmy was apt to term them.

Now it swung low down, as though about to hurry its setting. Then it would take a sudden notion to change the programme, and start to rise rapidly. Remember that this was over in the direction from which the scouts had come that same afternoon—the *west*. And when a heavenly body actually rises in that quarter it is about time people sat up and began to take notice, for all the rules of the universe seem to be turned upside-down by such a procedure.

Jack rubbed his eyes. He hardly knew what to make of it, and perhaps began to suspect that he might be dreaming, because a fellow can have the most ridiculous things happen to him when asleep.

"Look! oh, look!" exclaimed Harry; "it's going up, I tell you, right up straight, too! There, now it begins to swing around this way! Did you ever see anything like that before? No wonder they say this Death Valley is enchanted ground, and shelters things that long ago disappeared from the rest of the world. When even a star seems to rise in the west and skip around lively like that one is doing, it beats my time all hollow."

"What's the answer, Ned?" said Jack, helplessly.

There it was again. When conditions arose that left the rest of them gasping, and almost as helpless as a fish thrown up on the bank of the creek, Jack and Harry and Jimmy just felt that all they had to do was to turn to the scout master, and he would be able to explain it.

But Ned did not make any reply, at least immediately. Truth to tell he had been almost as badly shocked as the rest, and could hardly believe the evidence of his eyes. He was trying to grasp things so as to piece them together, and make out something on which to build a theory.

If it had been anywhere else, Ned might not have met with such difficulty as he now found himself up against; but this wonderful Death Valley had been held up before them as a place where one might expect to run across all sorts of mysteries and the spell was still upon them while in the midst of it.

"Perhaps it's just a comet coming this way!" Jack exclaimed, seeing that Ned did not manifest any great haste to express himself on the subject.

"Gee whiz! and wasn't somebody just telling us how people believed one did hit our old globe a whack in this quarter and make this big dent in the side? What if history repeats itself? Mebbe now one comes every night, and that terrible confusion is the sound of the impact. Say, if that happens don't you think my name will be Dennis; because there ain't any chance to climb a tree, or hide in a hole when a comet is chasin' after you. Whew! there she begins to head this was as sure as anything! We're goners, boys! But my tongue is stickin' to the roof of my mouth, I'm that scared. If it's the last thing I ever do I'm agoin' to have a drink."

Which Jimmy thereupon proceeded to do, as well as his shaking hands would permit. But then no one was paying the least attention to what he had been saying. The other scouts

were so accustomed to hearing Jimmy babble away when he became excited or frightened that they just took it all as a matter of course.

Ned was by degrees beginning to get his wits centered upon the subject. He stood there eagerly watching to see what that eccentric star would do next; and all the while he kept moving closer and closer to a reasonable explanation.

Back to his mind came recollections of the night of the Glorious Fourth, when myriads of paper balloons, inflated by hot air, were sent skyward over the great city by the sea which he called home.

Yes, he could in imagination see them moving majestically along as they struck some favoring air current. It might be many hundreds of feet high. And after night had come each little air voyager could be followed by the eye just so long as the burning torch remained to do its duty in supplying the heated air.

Somehow the movements of this dancing star vividly recalled these things. Ned seemed to be once more on the roof of his home, watching the fireworks and following the course of one of these heavenly messengers, sent up to carry the red, white and blue to the limit of its endurance test.

But it was next door to absurd to suspect that anybody would come away out here to

this land of dead hopes, this burning desert where human nature could only survive with the greatest difficulty, just to fly toy balloons!

The germ of an idea, however, had come to him with the comparison, out of all reason though it might seem at first.

He now began to notice that the flight of that moving star was not quite so erratic as he had at first thought. In fact, it appeared to have a certain well defined orbit, and which it was following with fidelity as well as dispatch; now advancing, anon retreating, this moment rising, and again falling swiftly as though about to plunge against the sandy waste, only to recover and again sail steadily on.

Then after all it was not governed by the whim of the air currents. Ned felt that chance had little or nothing to do with the way in which that light sped through the atmosphere; and from that conclusion it was only a step to the belief that human hands and the mind of man must be controlling the destiny of that mysterious flying star.

He listened intently.

There was not so much as a breath of air stirring. Everything was dead in that uninhabitable region. A terrible silence seemed to hang over the wide valley with the evil name, a silence so intense that it could almost be said

to be felt, just as once in a while the darkness is so fearful they call it palpable.

And perhaps to the waiting ear of the scout master a low and distant if singular humming sound drifted, now rising and anon falling, as though at the caprice of the wavering air currents.

Jimmy must have heard it too, for all at once he broke out again.

"Hark to it whinin', would you?" he exclaimed. "'Tis meself that never thought I'd live to hear a comet whistle and sing. I could shut my eyes and believe that I was listenin' to the hum of the old red mill up there near the farm where they used to send us boys from the Bowery every summer. But thank goodness, I do believe she's headin' away from us now. Mebbe after all the earth repelled the attack in time. Oh! I hope we don't get caught in any such mess as that. I like pancakes, but I never thought I'd want to be made into one of the same!"

"Stop talking so much, Jimmy!" said Jack, sternly; "you're bothering Ned so he can't even hear himself think."

"Yes," added Harry, "do please get a grip on your tongue, Jimmy. Once you start going and you never know when to quit. But I think you're away off when you say it has gone and left us, because it's heading this way again."

"Queerest thing I ever saw," muttered Jack. "Seems to swing around and around in a big circle, now going up, and then again coming down. I've heard of will-o'-the-wisps and jack-o'-lanterns, lights that can be seen playing around graveyards and damp lowlands at night; but this one is a mile high sometimes. If that is what they'd call a Death Valley jack-o'-lantern it's a wonder, that's all I've got to say about it."

They stood and gazed for another space of time, while the mysterious light continued to move along as strangely as ever. It was only a tiny glow, and at times they could just faintly follow it in its course. Even when it came closer they would never think of comparing it with a star of the first magnitude.

Ned kept on cudgeling his brain and holding fast to what he had already figured out. Piece-meal he was adding to the sum total, and there was hope that speedily he would have attained a commanding position from which he could announce complete success.

He noticed, for instance, when the traveling light advanced toward them that odd humming sound increased more or less in volume. Now Ned knew the purr of a busy motor so well that he compared this steady sound with the contented rhythm of an auto engine carrying on

the business for which it had been fashioned by its makers.

Thus step by step he was advancing along the lane. Already a great light had commenced to dawn upon him, though the thing was so stupendous that he almost feared to grasp it for fear his chums would think him "daffy."

"It keeps on comin' straight at us, sure pop!" Jimmy was saying uneasily, as if his old fears had again begun to clutch his anxious heart.

"Keep still, can't you!" expostulated Jack; "honest now, I believe it's you scares the thing away every time by your talk. Lie low and watch. Be prepared to act if we have to. Who knows but that it might be some great big moth that carries a lantern around with it when it flies—a regular mammoth firefly, I mean."

No one even tittered when Jack suggested such a ridiculous thing, simply because Ned and Harry were busy watching the advance of the flitting light and trying to figure out the wonderful truth; while Jimmy, still in an agony of alarm, was not in a condition to make merry at the expense of any one.

He was fumbling his gun as he stood there just back of the others, though hardly knowing why he should think such a thing could be of any help to him in case the traveling light turned out to be a shooting star bent upon

colliding with the earth below. Now, if it had only been raiding Indians that they were expecting to have drop in upon them, a gun that could be fired six times would be of great assistance in the defense of the camp. But Jimmy, even by the wildest stretch of his rubber-like imagination, could hardly picture the red sons of the plains coming through the air, seated on a dancing star, to attack the invaders of the valley.

Once again did the light turn after getting fairly close to where the four mystified scouts were grouped intently watching the manoeuvres of the mysterious star.

It was now going away from them, swinging around in its orbit, rising and then falling swiftly.

Harry gave a long sigh.

"Guessed it, Harry?" demanded Jack, eagerly, possibly translating this intaking of breath on the part of the other to mean success at last.

"What, me?" ejaculated Harry; "well, I should say not. I'm groping around in the dark just as bad as ever. It can't be a star, no more is it a comet; but what in the dickens is it?"

"Yes," muttered Jimmy, "that's what I want to know. If it's anything you can shoot why gimme a chance to empty my gun at the blame thing."

"Listen, boys," said Ned just then, and somehow there was a thrilling emphasis to his voice calculated to warn the other three that at last he had managed to clutch what would appear to be a reasonable explanation of the mystery; "I believe I've guessed the secret of the phantom star anyway, though it's enough to stagger your intellect!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

GUESSING THE ANSWER.

"There! didn't I say Ned'd get to it, give him time?" exclaimed Jimmy, triumphantly; indeed, to hear him talk any one might be pardoned for believing that the victory had been wholly Jimmy's, and not that of a chum.

"Hurry up and tell us, Ned, before the thing bobs out entirely," pleaded Jack, "because look at it sailing away off there till you can hardly pick it out among all the other stars."

"I think it'll come back again," Ned assured him, positively; "but no matter whether it does or not, I firmly believe that light is being carried on some sort of dirigible balloon!"

The others gave low cries of astonishment.

"Well, hear that, would you?" said Jimmy; "just as easy as turning over your hand, once you get the combination safe. A dirigible balloon—that's one you can steer, and make go against the wind, aint it? Over in Germany they've been havin' some of the same as big as mountains, army balloons they call 'em. But say, Ned, how'd this one ever get away across here? S'pose some storm must have carried it off and she landed right in old Death Valley? Does all this seesawin' back and forth mean they can't get away from here? I want to know?"

"Of course," Ned told them, "I can't explain what it means right now, but every time that swinging light came close to us I'm dead sure I could hear the purr of the strong motor that's keeping the thing moving wherever the air pilot chooses to send it. How about that, fellows? Can you fall in with my notion, or does it strike you as foolish?"

As one the other three backed him up.

"You guessed it, sure you did, Ned!" cried Jimmy.

"And of course the rest of us are wondering how you could have missed that answer, because it seems as though we ought to have hit on an explanation like that the very first thing," Jack observed heartily.

"I agree with you, Ned," added Harry, "and that it must be some sort of flying machine. If this had happened anywhere but in this queer country I might have guessed it as soon as you did; but down here they've been telling us such whopping big stories about all the dreadful things we'd run across if ever we struck Death Valley, that I found myself conjuring up dragons and such monsters in spite of myself. But what makes you think it's a dirigible, and not just an ordinary aeroplane; because I'm sure you've got reasons for believing so?"

"It's this way," Harry was answered by the scout master; "when I was using my ears to catch that buzzing sound I was at the same time straining my eyes. Now, the rest of you kept staring straight at that moving light, but I looked higher and it seemed to me just before the turn came I could faintly see some big

object like a tremendous cigar body blotting out the stars as it went along. And then all of a sudden it flashed over me that dirigible balloons are always built on that order, I suppose because the air pressure has to be overcome by having the ends pointed, something like you'd sharpen a lead pencil."

"But what under the sun would a balloon be doing out here, of all places in the wide world?" asked Jack, as he continued to stare at the glimmering light, just then pretty far away from them.

"Yes, how would it pay, tell me?" Jimmy wanted to know; for all he could think of in connection with a balloon was the money taken in at the gate, Coney Island fashion. "If you hunted over the whole country from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and up and down with a fine tooth comb from the Rio Grande to the Red River of the North, I don't believe you could run across a stretch where'd there'd be less of a crowd than right here. Why, even the wise ants and bees keep away from Death Valley; only crazy gold hunters and silly scouts out for a record ever drift in here."

"Well," Ned continued, reflectively, "of course we could hardly be expected to hit on everything at once, and in a full gallop; but if that is a dirigible, then make sure that there's a reason and a good one for its maneuvering around out here in the desert, and over Death Valley."

"Perhaps now they don't want to be seen by a crowd?" suggested Harry.

"There you've sounded the very idea I had hold of," Ned told him. "It might be the parties owning the air flyer have made some remarkable new discoveries in connection with aeronautics, and knowing how quick unscrupulous people are to crib others' ideas, why, instead of experimenting close to Los Angeles or San Diego, they've come out here to the home of desolation, sure that no spy's curious eyes can steal their secret."

"They just have to do something like that," Harry volunteered, briskly. "Why, don't you remember that when the Wright Brothers were conducting their experiments with their fool-proof flyer, that couldn't be upset even in a squally wind, they went down to the lonely beach at Kittyhawk, which I believe is in North Carolina, and carried on as they pleased. Ned, you keep on getting closer and closer to what seems to be the truth every minute of time."

"We'll be expecting him pretty soon to give us the names of the gentlemen who are spinning around up there in their dirigible balloon," Jack declared, clapping the scout master on the shoulder with the loving touch of a devoted chum.

"I wonder now if that was one!" Jimmy remarked, as though he might be grappling with some weighty subject that promised to be too much for him.

"Explain what you mean, can't you?" urged Jack, turning on him.

"That feller we saw on the pony, and that side-stepped like all creation when he guessed

we'd got our lamps fixed on him," Jimmy continued.

"What about him?" demanded Jack.

"Needn't bite me, you know," Jimmy expostulated; "I do have a bright thought once in a coon's age, it seems. Why, I was thinkin' that mebbe he might have been some sort of German spy tryin' to hook the secret of the invention this air pilot has got hold of."

"Oh! is that it?" pursued Jack; "not a bad idea—for *you*, Jimmy. But why do you say he might be a German?"

"I don't know, 'cept that most all we read about dirigibles comes from over on the Rhine. They put a heap of stock in that type of flyer, seems like, and ain't Count Zeppelin been making some sock-dolagers of steering balloons right along? Course it'd be a German spy that'd want to know what Uncle Sam's boys had up their sleeve."

"And on the other hand," said Ned, "that man on the broncho may have been a member of the aeronaut crowd. When he sighted us he wanted to get away in a hurry, because they don't mean to have impertinent strangers poking noses into their business. Has it gone out of sight altogether, boys? I was so busy talking that I must have lost it among all the stars up there."

"No, she's just turned, and seems to be coming back this way now, Ned," Harry assured him.

"And look what's happened, would you?" burst from Jimmy; "Why, the light's turned to a fiery red one. What d'ye reckon they meant by that?"

"It might be a signal to some of their friends on the ground below," Ned suggested.

"I wouldn't wonder," Harry agreed.

"Oh! I hope they'll start in and do some stunts, then," Jimmy ventured. "Just think of us sitting here in our blankets, and havin' a free show, with not a red cent to pay, either. The queerest thing about it all would be that this performance takes place in the valley that they said was as dead as a door nail. Faith, and we seem to find it pretty much alive, I do be thinkin'."

"That red light may only mean they've flown as much as they want, and are coming down again," Harry informed him.

"Wish we knew where," muttered the irrepressible Jimmy; "wouldn't we be waitin' to receive the daring aeronauts, and congratulating the same on their splendid flight? It happens that we know more about this aeroplane business than any bunch of scouts in the whole country, because we've been up in the clouds before now."

All of which was true, as any reader who has followed the fortunes of Ned Nestor and his lively chums knows, but of course it had little or nothing to do with the explanation of the problem that now puzzled them.

"It's certainly heading this way again," Ned mused, "and is making one of those wide circuits. We'll soon know what's in the wind besides a dirigible."

"Well, it's easy to see where they expect to land, and not so very far away from us right now," Jack now remarked.

"He means that other light on the ground, Ned," Harry added.

"Yes, I can see it," the scout master told them; "but I didn't notice it before Jack spoke; did any of you?"

"It's just come along," Harry affirmed.

"They might have had it hidden under something," Jack continued, for the latest discovery being his, he felt that he had a perfect right to handle the subject as he chose; "and then opened up when they got the signal of the red lantern. I don't suppose now, Ned, it'd be any use in our trying to wander over there, so as to hit up an acquaintance with these queer people who come to the desert to carry on their experiments in flying machines?"

"No, we couldn't be sure of getting there under half an hour, and long before then they would have gone away," was the answer he received, but Ned did not stop at that point, continuing on: "and besides, I don't think it might be the wisest thing going for us to butt in where we mightn't find our company wanted."

"Because they'd give us the grand bounce—is that what you mean, Ned?" asked Jimmy, rather resentfully.

"Well, I was thinking of another thing," Ned remarked, "and that it mightn't be safe going any closer to where that lantern can be seen on the ground."

"Of course there'd be the risk of having the big dirigible drop down on top of us," Jack observed, thoughtfully, "which wouldn't be the pleasantest thing I know of, but p'rhaps

now, Ned, you've thought up another reason that'd make it dangerous."

"Just what I have, Jack."

"The men themselves might be so mad they'd meet us with a bombardment; is that what you mean?"

"Well, not exactly, though a bombardment might happen to figure in it," came the mysterious answer.

"As how?" asked Harry.

"We've guessed that the lantern on the desert had something to do with the movements of the dirigible," said the scout master, impressively. "There it is coming heading this way right now, and flying ever so high, further than we've seen it up to now. There's a reason for that, boys, and the lantern had to do with it."

"You mean it was a signal, don't you, Ned?" demanded Harry.

"No question about it," was the reply, "and one of the aviators up there is going to mind, unless I'm much mistaken. All this circling about has been what you might call preliminary work, just to get tuned up, I should say. Now the real business of the night is coming into play!"

The others could not as yet understand what Ned meant by the strange words he had just uttered; they simply stood there and gazed at the two lights, one stationary on the desert, and the other swiftly advancing through the air.

CHAPTER XIX.

A KNOCK-DOWN ARGUMENT.

"Seems like the feller holdin' that lantern on the ground must stand as still as any rock figure," Jimmy was heard to say. "I've been keepin' tabs on him ever since we glimpsed the same, and take it from me he's as good as any wooden cigar store Injun that ever stood with his tomahawk lifted, and a bunch of cheroots in the other hand."

"But the chances are," Ned informed him. "that the lantern isn't being held at all, but happens to be lying there on the ground."

"Oh! is that so, Ned?" Jimmy remarked; "well, that changes the complexion of the thing a whole lot. I thought he must be gettin' tired holdin' it up like he was."

"But if they mean to make a landing wouldn't you think they'd want their assistants there so as to lend a helping hand?" queried Harry.

"But how do we know they think of landing just now?" the other asked him. "If you notice you'll see the balloon has gone up higher than at any other time. Yes, and while we can only give a guess, I believe it's still mounting while coming back this way."

"That doesn't look much like they expected to bring their air cruise to an end in any hurry," admitted Jack.

"Then the lantern signal means something else?" suggested Harry.

"It marks a certain spot," Ned told them.

"Sure," Jimmy added, as if to let them know he was following the argument closely, and believed he understood all that had been said up to then.

"That spot those in the dirigible want to keep tabs on while they are passing over. In the darkness of the night they can't see the first thing below them, and the whole earth is only a black void."

"Yes, but go on, Ned," urged Jack, almost breathlessly.

"You all seem to have forgotten something that has been giving us a whole lot of bother lately," the scout master continued. "I mean that terrific explosion coming once each night, and, only once!"

"Oh! do you think this balloon business could have anything to do with that?" demanded Harry.

"A whole lot," replied the other, instantly.

"But if the big gas bag busted every night——" began Jimmy, when he was interrupted by impatient Jack.

"Hold your bugle, can't you, Jimmy? You do hit on the silliest explanations I ever heard of. Of course Ned doesn't mean that. There are lots of other kinds of explosions, heaps of 'em. Now, in all the latest wars men in aeroplanes, and even dirigibles, have got to droppin' bobs down on the enemy's fortifications, and even warships. Ned, is that anywhere near what you're thinking about?"

"You've hit the target in the bull'seye, Jack, because that's just what I mean," Ned admitted.

They could hear Jimmy making queer sounds in his throat, as though he might be almost gasping for breath. But then none of them believed there was any danger of Jimmy choking as long as the water jug was so handy.

"And that stationary lantern?" continued Jack.

"Can be considered their target," came the reply. "If they wanted to drop a bomb from the drifting balloon when it gets over a certain spot, of course they'd have to know where they were aiming. If it was in the daytime they'd have no trouble; but perhaps these men are figuring on doing their work under cover of night, when the danger of being seen wouldn't amount to much. They're practicing, you understand, and every night they drop a bomb at a lantern below, from all sorts of altitudes."

"Whee! think of the boom in the lantern market, would you?" Jimmy commented, after his usual way.

"Tonight," continued Ned, "they seem to be aiming to try at a greater height perhaps than at any other time; for while it's hard to guess, I'd think that light must be all of half a mile above the earth."

"And mebbe they'll go awful wide of their target; you never can tell," said Jimmy, wriggling uneasily.

"That's so," added Harry.

"If that bomb chose to take a notion to hit close to us now, what'd happen?" the freckled-faced scout demanded.

"We'd get the shock of our lives, most likely," Ned told him; "but there's little danger of such a mistake happening. By now these air pilots must be in pretty good practice, and can hit close to the target."

"She's circling around once more, Ned," Harry informed them; "and seems like it might mean they expected to hit a bee line right now for the place."

"And me with no tree handy, not even a prairie dog's burrow to crawl in," was the sorrowful complaint of Jimmy McGraw; "but then what does she matter? If we get hit we won't know it. Fact is, we won't know anything again. And if the rest of you c'n stand it, there's no reason why I'd want to skidoo. I'm game for the racket. Let 'em come on and do their worst!"

Ned was taking a last observation, and believed he was reason to think it was just as he had said.

The traveling light in the heavens was moving with great swiftness. It had come from the southwest, and was making directly as though to pass over the spot where they could see the steady little glow that undoubtedly sprang from a lantern used as a "marker."

"They may be calling it a light aboard a hostile battleship," Ned went on to say; "and the intention is to discover just how well a bomb could be dropped so as to disable the same."

"Here's hoping they hit it plump center," was Jimmy's fervent prayer; for he was conjecturing as to what awful consequences might follow to himself and chums if those marksmen

of the heavens overshot the mark, and sent that infernal contrivance into their midst.

"Get ready, now!" warned Ned, impressively.

"What to do?" Jimmy asked, helplessly, moving his arms as though the wish that was uppermost in his mind just then was he might be given a pair of stout wings with which he could fly away from that inhospitable region forthwith.

"Drop on your faces, and keep down flat! Now, every fellow hug the ground for all you're worth!"

As Ned said this he put his words into immediate execution by falling on his knees, and then on his chest, extending himself as though he might be going through some physical culture exercises that required ground stretching.

The others realized that he meant every word he had said, and they hastened to copy his example. In this fashion, then, the four scouts hugged the ground, and almost held their very breath waiting to hear what might follow.

Had it been daytime Ned believed they might easily have seen whether those in the dirigible did actually drop anything when they had reached a certain spot almost above the stationary light, but in the gloom of that heavy Death Valley night of course it would be impossible to catch the first glimpse of any such thing, unless it happened to have a spluttering fuse attached, which was hardly probable.

Ned did have an idea he could tell something from trying to follow the movement of the moving dirigible above them. He could easily make it out now, though it appeared quite small,

such was the height at which it had climbed.

As he looked he became suddenly aware of the fact that its forward progress had almost ceased, owing to the stoppage of the faintly heard humming motor.

He could guess the reason which must be to allow of greater accuracy in the bomb-throwing test.

"It's coming—lie low!" Ned called out sharply, for he fancied that Jimmy, for instance, might be elevating his head, because Jimmy always wanted to see what was going on.

Five, ten seconds slipped by.

The dirigible balloon was again moving along now, fast enough to baffle all the marksmanship of the enemy supposed to be hovering below.

Then it came.

There was a blinding flash of light, that dazzled the eyes of the boys more than any lightning they had ever experienced. That was, however, only the beginning of their troubles, it seemed.

Accompanying this brilliant radiance was a most dreadful crash, that deafened them, one and all. The ground seemed to shiver and quake in a sickening manner, as though it might be about to open and engulf them.

If a tropical earthquake could be any worse those boys would most earnestly hope they might never experience one during the course of their natural lives.

All around them they could hear sounds that would indicate the falling of great quantities of sand, as though the exploding bomb had scooped out a tremendous cavity when it tore loose.

"Anybody hurt?" asked Ned, as soon as he could recover his breath.

"Only my feelings," replied a faint voice, which turned out to belong to Jimmy.

"Our poor burros must have been knocked flat," remarked Harry, "if all the kicking and braying counts for anything. I hope they didn't get hurt much, because we need them in our business."

Jack was not saying anything, because short of wind; but he pressed Ned's arm in a way to convince the scout master that he could be accounted all right, even if a little the worse for wear.

"I hope it's all over," Jimmy continued; "you don't think they'll likely come back and try to knock the pins down in the other alley, do you, Ned?"

"Hardly, Jimmy. You remember that we only heard one boom a night; yes, and that prospector told us the same thing, that there was never more than the one fearful bang. Well, we've had it now, and that'll wind up the business for tonight. By the time another comes around we hope to be on the other side of Death Valley, and beyond the range of these dangerous experiments."

"Whew! get the smell, would you?" exclaimed Jimmy, as he evidently clutched at his nose. "If that don't beat any odor I ever struck. Talk to me about your limberger cheese and your asafetida, but that takes the cake. Say, now, d'ye think they mean to smother everybody that escaped bein' hit by the bomb? Is this some new gas to be used in war times

like we take laughing gas to have an acher drawn?"

"It's the smoke that accompanies the bursting of the bomb," said Ned. "What was in that same to make all that noise we don't know, but it may have been some brand of dynamite. The smell will soon pass away, so don't bother your head about that. Be thankful that we got no worse."

"I'd be a four flush if I wasn't thankful," declared Jimmy, with sudden vim; "and in the morning 'tis me that means to take a look over where that lantern marked the target, just to see what sort of a hole that thing made."

"The dirigible is making off toward the east this time," Harry informed them, for instead of entering into this latest discussion he had kept watching the vanishing dancing star.

"And coming down lower all the while," added Jack; "which I take it means they expect to make a landing somewhere. It would be a fine thing now if we could only run across the people of that airship. I'd like to find out who they are, and let 'em know there are other pebbles on the beach; that they are not the only people who have sailed among the clouds. There are others, some of them Boy Scouts who, seeing their duty, didn't hesitate to do it.

"Look at our little tent, how it's been flattened down by the concussion of air when that bomb burst," Harry told them, for now their eyes had in a measure recovered from the effects of that blinding glare they were able to once more see objects near by.

"No damage done so far," Ned assured them; "and I hope we find the burros all right. I'm going to see right now, after which I expect to lie down and get what sleep I can."

The pack animals were still considerably excited. They strained at their ropes as though nothing would please the lot more than a chance to speedily get out of that country where poor burros were knocked around in such a shameful fashion, as though they were bundles of wood, without feelings to be ruffled.

Ned spoke soothingly to them, and even ventured to pat old Teddy on the neck, although careful to give those springy rear hoofs of his a wide berth. He had seen how hard a "canary" of the mines could kick, and felt no desire to experiment along those interesting lines.

After coming back he put his threat into execution, finding a place under the tent, which the other boys had succeeded in once more erecting, and then laying out to secure what rest he could before another dawn.

The other three copied his example, even Jimmy being unable to hold out when he saw a chance to forget his troubles. Sleep always did appeal strongly to Jimmy, as we learned on numerous occasions; and he could be bribed to do a good many things by a promise of a chance to dream his dreams.

The light that moved had long since vanished from view, nor could they hear the slightest further sound that would indicate the presence of a working motor within a mile of their camp in Death Valley.

Undoubtedly those daring souls who each night went aloft in their new dirigible balloon, presumably of a type different from anything known to the general public, must have landed somewhere.

Around them lay the same dreadful silence which seemed so oppressive. The boys missed many familiar voices of the night. One never knows how cheery the crickets, katydids, tree frogs, and other night singers sound until the time comes when on some bleak desert only a deathly silence surrounds him.

These comrades tried and true had camped in many queer places during the time they had been accompanying Ned on many of the expeditions made in the service of the Secret Service at Washington. They were ready to frankly admit, however, that this present experience quite excelled them all, so far as strange conditions and surroundings were considered. As Jimmy eloquently declared in his emphatic way, it quite "took the cake!"

Despite these sinister surroundings the boys slept fairly well. Indeed, once Jimmy "passed over" his voice was not heard in the silent land until daylight aroused them all to a consciousness that there was another strenuous experience ahead for them.

Jimmy was for hurrying off in order to make a little investigation on his own hook, and find out what the result of that terrific explosion had been; but the scout master took him by the jacket and mildly but effectually squelched his ardor.

"Hold your horses for a little while, Jimmy," he told the impetuous member of the Wolf Patrol; "it wouldn't hardly be fair for you to shirk your regular duties and go wandering off on a private pleasure jaunt. After we've had our bite we'll put the packs on the burros, and all start together. It happens that we can just as well take in that section while heading for the east."

They had no fire, not because Jimmy did not want to bother making one, but from an utter lack of fuel. Besides, it was so very hot even at that early hour before sunrise, that Jack expressed his conviction that the striking of a single match might cause the whole atmosphere to blaze up. Of course he was joking; but all the same those who heard him make that remark were ready to agree with him to the effect that it might be a dangerous experiment to try.

Jimmy said no end of mean things about the lack of the cup that always cheered him when starting in for a day's work.

"You all hear me talking when I say that never again a camp on a sahara for me like this. Give me a cruise on a floating iceberg—and by the way that sounds delightful just now, don't it. I've gone and made some coffee with cold water, but it's only slush, and an apology for the genuine article."

"Cheer up, Jimmy, better days coming!" Ned told him.

"When we get among the broncho busters you'll have as much coffee as you want, also all the excitement to the square inch they can

serve up for us," Harry threw to him as a sop of comfort.

Some time afterwards they approached what seemed to be a gap in the level sand. All around them were plain evidences of a most terrific explosion, and as they stood on the brink of the chasm, and gazed upon the damage wrought by the bomb, it was Jimmy who voiced the general feeling when he remarked:

"Gee! whiz! think what would have happened to a battleship if that had dropped on the deck. I'm givin' you a straight spiel when I say there wouldn't have been a sign of her above water half an hour after it struck. Seems to me the nation to get on to this, and quit building dreadnaughts that cost millions and millions, while they gather a fleet of airships, and make bombs, will be the one to win out in the next war."

"And now that I think of it," said Ned, "I remember seeing at least three holes something like this while we were coming along yesterday. They were partly filled again by the shifting sand, but I can see that they must have been made by other bombs, dropped night after night."

As the morning advanced they realized that this day was to prove the crowning one of all, so far as almost unbearable heat was concerned. Never had they experienced anything like it. Jimmy subsided early, and refused to say a single word. If anyone tried to get a "rise" out of him, the nearest approach to being civil Jimmy would exhibit was a low growl, that seemed to warn them to let him alone.

This was a strange state of affairs for Jimmy,

too; because as a rule he could be looked on as a good-natured fellow, and as obliging as they make them. But the tropical heat and constant suffering will put a crimp in any one's disposition; and Jimmy was scratching almost constantly from flea bite and a red rash combined, and consequently inclined to be irritable.

All of them were glad when noon came along, and they made a little stop more for the purpose of resting the burros than because there was any real desire to take the customary "snack."

"Don't you think we must be nearly over this horrible sink?" Jack asked, looking around in a general way, though undoubtedly his inquiry was directed at Ned.

"We may have a couple more hours of it," was the calm reply, filled with assurance; "but the worst is past, I'm thankful to say."

"Two long hours!" Jimmy was heard to faintly mutter; "I don't see how I can stand it. Right now I've been drinking so much that I'm in a regular sweat all the time. But it's lucky we had plenty of good water along with us. All through my life I'm agoin' to make it my business to always look out for the water supply. When you need it you want it pretty quick, and pretty bad. Ned, isn't that the border ahead there about two gunshots off?"

"I think you're right about that, Jimmy," came the reply; "It was what I had in my mind when I put the time limit up to a couple of hours. If we hit up a warmer pace we might make it in less, but what's the use?"

In this spirit of thankfulness and relief that their troubles were nearly over so far as they

concerned the terrible threats of Death Valley, the boys urged on their burros, now stepping more cheerfully, as though smelling water not so far ahead.

They were soon able to make out the material of which the rather dense chapparel was formed, and Ned could not help but notice what excellent hiding-places Nature had formed there in which a fugitive from the stern hand of the law or a deserter from the army might lie in safety for days, weeks, and months, if the commissary department chanced to be well taken care of.

The little cavalcade had arrived within long distance gunshot of the border of the ill-named valley when a faint shot was heard, and a bullet whined past.

CHAPTER XX.

OUT OF THE OVEN.

Everybody stopped instantly, even the tired burros seeming to know that this might be considered a signal for a halt.

The four scouts looked at one another.

"Gee whiz! that was meant for *me!*" exclaimed Jimmy. "It came so close to my coco that I believe I could feel the wind as it passed. And it was such a sickening sort of whine, too."

"Whoever can it be that's got a grudge against us, and wants us to stay here on the red hot sand, while they take it comfortable there by the water-hole?" was the indignant outburst from Jack.

He had been fumbling for his gun, which one of the burros was carrying at that moment, so as to relieve the owner from all unnecessary burdens in the heat of the advance across the further confines of the silent valley.

Jimmy's martial spirit was also aroused, and he had already gained possession of his weapon.

"Get behind the burros, first of all," said Ned quietly. "We wouldn't like to have them shot, but better that than one of us."

The advice was timely, and the other scouts hastened to avail themselves of it. As there were just four burden-bearers each boy had a

movable fortress behind which he could peep out toward the chaparrel from which that mysterious shot had come.

Here was an unexpected source of trouble, and one that rather filled them with a feeling akin to dismay. They were so overcome with the terrific heat that had oppressed them for many hours that the disappointment of being held up was very keen.

Just beyond lay shelter and water, while they were still exposed to the scorching blasts of the overhead sun and the blistering effects of the superheated sand.

From behind the burros, standing there with their packs, the scouts shot many curious, yes, and angry looks towards the danger point. Not a single thing had any of them as yet discovered to give a hint as to the identity of this hidden enemy.

"Watch that point where the smoke was curling up when we heard the shot," Ned was telling them, sagely.

"That was close to the tree that bends to the left, wasn't it, Ned?" asked Jack.

"Yes, not more than ten feet, I should say," came the reply, showing how it had become second nature for the scout master to notice even small things that had been suddenly brought to his attention.

"Not a single sign of the jay, Ned!" he ventured to complain. "Here I am ready to soak him, and he's that mean he just keeps out of sight. Why can't I have a little bit of luck, I'd like to know? For thirty cents I'd sprint over there and flag him."

"You'll do nothing of the kind," said Ned, decisively. "We've got to decide on some other plan of action. What's the use of rushing things, and either losing some of our burros, or else getting wounded ourselves. And understand, even a little hurt may mean a heap of trouble afterwards in this boiling heat."

"I think what you say hits the case all right, Ned," said Harry, who seldom disagreed with the leader, whom he greatly admired. "The question is how can we get out of this heat, and yet not have to rush into the firing zone?"

"Yes," added Jack, gravely, "we're that far away now he couldn't make a hit when he let us have a shot; but once we cover a few more hundred feet and it might be a different thing. I'm just as mad as Jimmy here, but I can see how it would be a silly job for us to try and carry that place by storm."

"Who under the sun can it be?" Harry remarked, as though that part of the matter gave him more real concern than the question of how they could overcome the difficulty.

"First, there are those Indians we had the brush with," suggested Ned.

"Great guns! yes, and two of the same were in shape to kick up more trouble!" Jimmy ventured to say.

"Then it might be we've just happened to stumble on the place where the men who are conducting those experiments with the dirigible balloon have their camp, though I've been looking, and failed to glimpse anything that seemed like the big silk bag. If that's kept full of gas they couldn't hide it very easily, I should think."

"But, Ned, why would they fire on us?" objected Jack.

"Honestly, I don't know," was the answer; "but you remember we decided that since they were conducting these experiments in secret, and had come away out to this lonely stretch of country to be free from observation, perhaps they believe we're employed by some rival firm to spy on them, and steal their wonderful discovery, so as to sell it to a foreign government."

"Then that shot might have been meant just as a warning, and not intended for a hit?" Harry inquired.

"Now," continued Ned, reflectively, "while we were heading for that particular place, because it happened to be in a direct line with our coming out of Death Valley, I don't see that we've got any call to keep straight on, no matter if we run the gantlet of a hail of lead. There are other places just as good to us, to the right and to the left."

"That's so," assented Harry, while Jack nodded his head in the affirmative; and having seen that his chums agreed with him, Ned continued:

"Then we'll turn aside here, and start to head due south, because after we get out of this place we've got to change our course that way, you know. We can travel a mile or so, and then head in."

"What if the shots come again?" asked Jack. "That would show they meant business wouldn't it, Ned?"

"Yes, and in that case we'd have to deploy and make some sort of attack, because for one

I'd object to being kept out here in this scorching sun against my will."

"Object?" shouted Jimmy, bridling up; "I'd kick like a steer, let me tell you. If that handy boy sends any more of his spare lead whistlin' around *my* ears he's goin' to hear from this barker," and he patted his repeating rifle affectionately as he said this, looking ever so fierce at the same time.

"Come, let's get a move on then," advised Harry. "My head is feeling as if it might be sizzling, and with all that nice shade so close by it's a shame for us to be held up this way. But perhaps there's a water-hole they're camped at, and don't want to be chased out."

"Well, if it's the Indians, we'll leave them alone," said Ned; "because we've got plenty of water with us yet, and there are other places, I reckon, beyond, the river anyhow. Scouts never try to get into a fight, though if it's forced on them they like to give a good account of themselves."

"Yes, and lick the other fellow in the bargain," grunted Jimmy, frowning as he looked toward the spot where that little puff of smoke had told of the presence of the unseen foeman.

While a good scout, Jimmy always had great difficulty in restraining his natural liking for a "scrap." Many a time in the past had he fallen under the sore displeasure of his friend and mentor, Ned Nestor, on account of his fighting proclivities. But then what else could be expected, since Jimmy had spent much of his life in the Bowery in New York City, and what is bred in the bone it is difficult to beat out of

the flesh. Fighting and complete happiness were terms that always went together in the mind of Jimmy McGraw.

So the borros were prodded again and made to start afresh. The shrewd animals did not like it at all when, instead of keeping directly on for the welcome shade, they were compelled to turn to the right, and start along the hot sand.

"To be sure they smell the water, and hate to give it up," declared Jimmy, after he had been obliged to exert all his strength in order to make his pack animal turn aside; "and by the same token I don't know as I blame the rascals at all. Who wouldn't feel like takin' risks for a drink of nice cool water; and all we've got is heated up, so that it's near the boilin' point this minute, so it is."

There was complaint in Jimmy's words, but no one gave any indication of noticing the chip on his shoulder; for secretly Jimmy thought they should have advanced straight toward the chaparral, and routed the concealed foe out, no matter if affairs became pretty warm in the making of history.

When Ned considered that they had covered enough territory he again gave the order to turn toward the side of the valley; for at this point there was a positive border, where the sand stopped, and vegetation began, even though this latter was really nothing to boast of, being for the most part mesquite bushes and scraggy looking dwarf trees that spread all over the ground as though engaged in a daily deadly battle with that terrific heat.

All the while they were advancing Ned had kept a close watch upon the suspected territory. Of course it was his intention to ascertain whether the party who had fired upon them meant to keep up the warfare, and was following their progress by passing through the chaparral. But so far as he could see there was nothing to indicate the fact, and Ned had hopes that they would not be molested when the little expedition neared the brush.

If there was a water-hole at the other place, those who were encamped there may only have meant to keep others from sharing their good fortune. Ned hoped that it would turn out this way, for he did not wish to have trouble, either with the Indians or any bad men of the region.

Cautiously they advanced, trying to keep covered as much as possible by the burros and their packs. As scouts the boys had learned many things, and caution was one of these. They showed considerable cleverness in making this strategic advance under the direction of the scout master.

Naturally as they drew very close to the shelter that might be hiding enemies they felt more or less excitement, because none of them knew when a hostile shot might ring out and the fight be on. They had planned what to do under such conditions, and each fellow had his part in the maneuver laid out.

After all it turned out that their fears were groundless. They reached the border of the greasewood bushes, without anything happening to disturb them, and were speedily seeking shelter from the sun under the first trees they

could find. Even then it was frightfully hot, not a single cooling breath of air fanning their blistered cheeks.

"Nothin' doin'!" said Jimmy, heaving a sigh, either of relief or regret, and his chums, who knew him so well, could easily imagine it must be the latter.

"We'll lie down here and rest for a while," said Ned; "keeping on the watch so as not to be taken by surprise."

"And then what?" asked Harry.

"Well, for one, I'm disposed to say we stay around here till the sun gets down," the scout master replied. "Walking will be better after night comes, and as there's a young moon, why, it isn't going to be so very dark for a while. But of course, if the rest of you would rather push right on, all you've got to do is say the word. I'm willing to do whatever seems best."

"We'll stay here, then," declared Harry.

Jack and Jimmy echoed his words. Indeed, they were so utterly exhausted that the idea of continuing their journey just then filled every one with dismay. A few hours rest would give new life to both scouts and burros, they realized.

The pack animals were already nosing eagerly around, trying to discover a few bites of something green, though without much success.

"When we get to the river it will be different," said Ned, as he watched these almost pitiful efforts of the donkeys; "and until then they'll have to keep alive on the feed we bought from the prospecting party. Once at Harry's uncle's ranch and life will be all a picnic for Teddy and the rest."

An hour crept on, and the sun was getting lower toward the horizon, though the furious heat kept up as much as ever.

Ned kept watch part of the time, and when he felt as though he must doze a little he had Harry or Jack promise to keep their eyes about them, so that nothing might happen to take them by surprise.

It was toward the end of the second hour that Ned, coming out of a nap, looked around, and noticed something out of the way.

"Where's Jimmy?" he asked, suddenly, and with suspicion in his voice.

Harry, who had been acting as sentinal at the time, turned his head to look.

"Why, he was there the last time I twisted my head around, and seemed to be dozing like he nearly always does," he exclaimed; "to think of him sneaking off like that, and playing a trick on the rest of us! Serve him right, Ned, if we just went on our way and left him to catch up as he might. But what do you suppose the silly fellow's gone and done; has he crept in the bushes to find a cooler spot?"

But Ned already had a pretty good suspicion it was something more than that.

CHAPTER XXI.

JIMMY CAPTURES THE WATER HOLE.

"Now, that's what I call queer!" Harry was saying. "You don't believe Jimmy could walk off in his sleep, do you, Ned?"

"Well, hardly," replied the scout master, with a smile. "When he crept away, keeping an eye on you to make sure he wasn't noticed, Jimmy had a little scheme of his own in that crack-brained head of his. Where was he lying last, Harry? We might take a look, and see which way he went."

Jack, hearing them talking, came up and wanted to know what it was all about; so he was quickly informed. When Harry had pointed out the exact spot occupied by the absent Jimmy they all started looking around for signs, because long practice had made them good trackers.

"Here's where he made off on his hands and knees," Ned showed them; "and stopping every ten feet or so to look around. You can tell that by the way his knees dig into the ground deeper; that was caused by the grinding when he pressed his full weight on them in turning."

"But what's this line alongside?" asked Jack.

"He was trailing his gun," explained Ned.

"Now here he got on his feet, and see how smartly he kept that line of bushes between himself and Harry. Jimmy knows considerable about woodcraft, it seems. All those lessons haven't been wasted, even if I did almost give up hope."

Ned acted as though rather pleased with the discovery, though he could not easily forgive Jimmy for making what might prove to be a foolish move.

"But whatever got into the fellow's silly head to desert us this way, Ned?" Harry asked. "Oh! I hope it wasn't that the terrible heat set him looney, and he's wandering off somewhere at this minute, perhaps gone back to the valley he said he never wanted to see again."

"No, it isn't that," Ned told them. "Just pay attention as we run this trail out for a dozen or two yards. Then you'll get an idea about what scheme came into the head of our chum."

When they had done this Ned again turned to the other pair.

"Well, what's the answer?" he asked, simply.

Jack gave a grunt and replied:

"Same old thing; I reckon Jimmy just wanted a cool drink so bad that he made up his mind to get it, and as he didn't think you'd give him permission if he took the trouble to ask, why, he sneaked it."

"My idea to a fraction," assented Harry, grinning.

"And that is just what happened," Ned continued, frowning. "I hardly know what we ought to do about it."

"You mean whether to stay here and wait

for Jimmy to come back, or hunt him up; is that it, Ned?" questioned Jack.

"You remember that there were hostiles camped at the spring," Ned observed, thoughtfully; "and the question is whether they stayed on, or slipped away, thinking our move was only intended to flank them. If the last, of course Jimmy will not get into any trouble."

"He may be there by this time, and lowering the visible water supply to beat the band," suggested Jack. "I certainly never saw any fellow with a thirst like Jimmy. If ever he took to real drink there'd have to be a lot of new breweries and distilleries started."

"Let's hope then he'll always remain on the water wagon," Ned continued, while he seemed to be listening intently, as though fearful of hearing a sudden burst of gunfire, and dreading what that might signify.

But all remained as silent as the grave. Not a bird was there near the Valley of Death to utter the faintest cry. No animal rustled the dry brushwood near by, because they avoided this region as though it were in truth accursed.

"I think that perhaps I'd better start after Jimmy, while the rest of you stay here," was the final decision made by the scout master.

"Wait, Ned, for it strikes me I heard the howl of a wolf just then, and it came from over there, where he meant to strike the brush. I know Jimmy's signal as well as I do my own name. He never gets that howl just as it should be; you'd think his wolf had a sore throat, or had lost all its teeth in old age.

There it goes again. I guess Jimmy's all right, or he wouldn't act that way."

"Chances are," said Harry, "he found the water hole deserted, and wants the rest of us to come along, and enjoy what he had to leave because his capacity was so limited. S'pose you answer him, Ned."

Ned accordingly started in to give Jimmy the wolf sign. Being members of the same patrol they had practiced exchanging these so often that if necessary a regular conversation could be carried on between them.

"Yes, he wants us to come right along, and says the coast is clear," Ned announced, after a little while had elapsed.

"It beats me how you manage to make out anything from Jimmy's blundering way of sending!" declared Jack.

"Oh! I just try to put myself in Jimmy's place," laughed the scout master, "and then make a stab for it. In this case I could guess what he was trying to tell me, and that made it easy. But let's stir up the burros, get the packs on again, and make a move. Fresh water isn't so bad, though I'll have to scold Jimmy for taking that sneak. He might have stumbled into all sorts of trouble."

"But his luck held good, and he didn't," Jack remarked. "Because, while Jimmy always declares he's the most unlucky fellow living we know different. He gets into heaps of bad scrapes through his blundering, but always manages to climb out, and lots of times it's only through the best of fortune."

They were soon on their way. Every little

while they could hear that excruciating howl of the wolf from ahead, as Jimmy encouraged them on. And in the end they discovered their comrade waving his campaign hat to them, while he held up a tin cup, and then quaffed its contents as greedily as though he had not been doing this same thing for the last half hour.

Still there was plenty more where that had come from. Ned had been a trifle anxious, not knowing but what those who had been chased away might have done something malicious to poison the water, as Indians have been known to do by throwing certain dried leaves into a spring at which they expected enemies to drink.

The fact that Jimmy was still alive and able to imbibe his share, after half an hour and more of it, reassured the scout master.

They were soon settled down, and taking things as easy as possible. Before long, however, the question came up to decide who the unseen marksman may have been; and while Jack, Jimmy and Harry were wrangling over this, each advancing certain lines of argument in support of his pet theory, Ned quietly looked around, and soon discovered enough to tell him the truth.

"It was our Indian friends," he told the others.

"Huh! not much of a friendly act, to buzz that bullet so close to my ear that it felt like a bee brushin' past," grumbled Jimmy.

"You found their tracks, then?" Jack asked; "and they must of course have been wearing moccasins, as all Indians do."

"And didn't they toe-in, Ned," Harry wanted to know; "because you can always tell an Indian's footprints by the way he walks."

"Yes," replied Ned, "they all wore moccasins, and they toed-in, as you say, Harry. That stamped them for Indians, of course; but it didn't say they were the same who tried to steal our burros down on the desert a while back, and had to skip out because of our hot fire."

"How did you prove that, Ned?" Jimmy demanded.

"In the first place," the other told him, "I learned that there were just three of them here, all told, and that was the number of our foes. Then one of their ponies was lame, for you can see how it drags the left hind leg. You remember that we had to shoot a pony so as to spoil their game of stampeding our pack animals? And last of all one of the Indians is wounded, for he was laid here by the water while the others washed his wound, and bound it up after the Indian way. Look at these spots of dried blood on the ground; and here are some shreds of cotton cloth that must have been torn from the colored shirt of one brave."

"Cleverly done, too, Ned; I mean the way you figured all this out," Jack hastened to admit; for the scouts were all proud of the accomplishment of their leader, being ready at any time to sit at his feet and share his knowledge.

About the time the sun was hovering over the horizon and preparing to take the dip that would presently plunge the valley into darkness,

Jimmy was seen to start up as though an idea had struck him.

"Here, you just hold your horses!" called Jack, making as though to reach threateningly for his gun; "you've given us enough bother for one day; so don't think we'll let you wander off again. Want to bag your Indians this time, do you?"

"Nope, you're away off, Jack," replied Jimmy, with a good-natured grin; "I meant to skirmish around and see if I could get enough wood together to have a cooking fire. Thinkin' of hot coffee made my mouth water, so it did. I hope you won't put the kibosh on that stunt, Jack."

"Go ahead, then," was the way Jack admitted that the idea also appealed pretty strongly to him.

So it came about that they had a fairly decent meal that evening, washed down by generous draughts of Jimmy's famous coffee, which none of the others ever claimed the ability to make, for various reasons of diplomacy, no doubt.

Ned had not changed his plan of starting off in the early evening, so as to get some distance on their way before spending the night. Jack and Harry saw to filling one of the kegs with fresh water, so as to be ready for any emergency that might arise; for they did not believe they were wholly out of the desert simply because they had left Death Valley behind them.

Jack was exulting over the fact that he had persisted in taking so many pictures of the events connected with their desert wanderings. When Jimmy heard him saying words to this effect he made out to be surprised.

"'Tis meself that fails to understand what pleasure any of us will ever get out of seeing that awful place again, in a picture," he observed, with disgust in his whole manner. "I'm sure to dream of it lots of times, and wake up yelling that my tongue is glued to the roof of me mouth, and that I'd be willing to give anything I owned for just one little drink of water."

"Well," Jack advised him, "if I were you, Jimmy, after I got home again I'd have a ten-gallon tank built, and fixed close to my bed. Then, with a hose and a funnel, all you'd have to do when you woke up, after one of those nice dreams, would be to turn the faucet and fill up. Think it over, won't you? It's a time-saver, sure."

"Oh! well, keep on pokin' all the fun you want at me," Jimmy told him, with an air of resignation; "but did you have the thirst that I was born with you'd soon be singin' out of the other side of your mouth, Jack."

They left the water-hole, not without sincere regrets on the part of one chum, to be sure, and plunged into the country that lay between them and the distant river.

Once this was reached and crossed Ned knew that the character of the land would change for the better. He certainly believed that they had seen enough of deserts for once in their lives, and would have experiences to look back to such as must vastly entertain the other scouts connected with the troop when they reached the home city in the East.

Still there might be other adventures awaiting them when they arrived at the cattle ranch

belonging to Harry's uncle; for somehow it seemed that things always began to sizzle and boil when Ned and his chums came along, no matter how quiet and humdrum they may have been before.

That this actually did come about might as well be confessed right here; and also that the remarkable happenings through which the four chums passed have been set down in the next volume of this series, which may be had under the title of "Boy Scouts on the Open Plains; or, The Round-up Not Ordered."

Of course it was not the intention of Ned to make a long journey on that night. The young moon gave only a small supply of light, and would be setting before many hours. Then the darkness would probably be so dense that they could not make profitable progress, and must wait for the coming day in order to go on to the nearest branch of the Amargosa River. This, coming down from the region near the Bare Mountains, meanders along in a half-hearted way, and finally loses itself in what is known as Dry Lake, to which there seems to be no visible outlet.

Ned had studied these things over, and held to the theory that underground streams carried off the water from these queer lakes, because he had read of great rivers coming out of mysterious canyons, and emptying into the Colorado on its way to the Gulf of California, across the Mexican border.

The little expedition went stumbling along. Progress was not very rapid, for it was still

too hot for much exertion, even though the sun had sunk to rest long before.

Jimmy met with more difficulties than any of the rest, simply because he was by nature clumsy, and inclined to be careless at the same time. Still, as he brought up the rear, by the time he came along the others had cleared a passage, so that he had it far easier than the one in the van, Ned himself.

Of course they made considerable of a racket as they pushed through the brush in this fashion. The burros even thought they smelled a new supply of water ahead, for in turn they lifted up their tuneful voices and brayed for it.

Ned had just turned to Jack who was next in line, and observed that it was a good thing they did not happen to be in a hostile country, or they might get themselves into a peck of trouble when it happened.

He seemed to suddenly run into some sort of trap, for without the least warning Ned found himself assailed by a figure that sprang up out of the bushes. Taken off his guard the scout master could put up little in the way of defense; and so he was carried backward until he found himself lying there with a heavy body perched on his chest, and realized that he was a prisoner.

CHAPTER XXII.

SAFE THROUGH PERILOUS WAYS—CONCLUSION

"Wait up there, who's doing anything to you, I'd like to know?"

That was what Ned heard Jimmy exclaiming as he was hurled to the ground; but it was enough to tell him that he could not be the only victim to this strange holdup.

For a short time there was more or less scrambling, and then as this died away a gruff voice called out:

"Got the whole bunch secured have you, Dangerfield?"

Apparently the man who was calmly seated on Ned's chest bore that name, for he immediately replied:

"Seems like we had, Captain; but what d'ye think, they're only a lot of boys after all. From the way I heard them chaffing each other as they came along, it doesn't look as though they might be *very* dangerous customers."

"Well, bring them over here, and we'll interview them," continued the unseen one, who apparently must be in supreme command; "I've known boys who were as sly as any rascals you ever met with. Perhaps the Wagstall Company has sent a bunch of youngsters out here, thinking we wouldn't dream of suspecting

what they came for. But an examination of their stuff ought to tell the story."

"It will!" roared the irrepressible Jimmy, who had evidently tired of wrestling with his burly captor, and stopped to listen to what was being said. "And 'tis meself that warns you right here and now we'll hold you all responsible for any damage done to them water kegs, which we never could get on without. Treat the same with deference, no matter what ye do to the rest of us."

"Get up, and come with me," said the man who had answered to the name of Dangerfield, as he gave Ned's arm a jerk. "Don't dream of showing any spunk and making trouble for yourself. If you can prove a clean bill of health well and good; you'll have no trouble with us, I give you my word."

"Oh! that's all right," replied Ned, pleasantly, for he now understood just how matters stood, because that name of Wagstaff told him a well-known firm making aeroplanes under certain patents was evidently intended. "We'll all go without any trouble, because we feel that you've made a big mistake, and will soon be ready to beg our pardons. Jimmy, remember, no nonsense now, but show that you can be a gentleman."

"Huh! as if I wasn't always that," grumbled the other scout, as he allowed his captor to help him on his feet; "but they needn't a been so rough with a feller. I've got a lump on me leg where I came down on a root with him atop of me."

After walking a little distance they came to where a lantern hung from the branch of a dwarf oak, though its light must have been muffled up to then, for none of them had glimpsed it before.

A man was seated on an upturned cracker box. He was dressed after the fashion of those who go up in aeroplanes, and Ned smiled as he noticed this fact, for it told him his guess had hit the mark.

This man, who had very keen eyes, and the reckless air that so well becomes a balloon pilot, looked at the four scouts when they were ranged in front of him.

Presently he smiled. They never knew whether this was on account of realizing that his recent fears concerning rival spies must be absolutely groundless; or that he had seen the belligerent attitude assumed by Jimmy, who, with folded arms, stood there, and fairly scowled at the other.

"What's this I see?" remarked the air pilot; "Boy Scouts out on the desert, and heading as if they'd come out of the worst hole on the face of the earth, Death Valley? Tell me, have you actually dared to pass through there and live to tell the story?"

"Why, it was tough enough, sir, we admit," Ned told him, "but then we stood it all right. You see we'd read up all we could and picked up information everywhere since coming to Southern California. We're heading for a cattle ranch owned by an uncle of my friend here, Harry Stevens, and in a spirit of adventure made up our minds that we'd try and see if we

could pass across the Mojave Desert we'd heard so much about, also through the notorious Death Valley. None of us ever want to go through the experience again, I own up, but we've done it, and still feel able to eat three meals a day. This other boy is Jack Bosworth, and the shorter one Jimmy McGraw."

The man was watching them very closely all the while Ned talked. He evidently did not mean to be taken off his guard, or allow a pack of boys to hoodwink him, for the prize at stake was too precious to be tamely lost to a rival firm not too scrupulous perhaps as to how they attained their ends so long as they met with success.

"I suppose now you can show us plenty of proof that you are just what you claim to be, my young friend?" he asked, suspiciously.

"I should say we could," Jimmy answered before Ned could say a word. "We travel with letters of recommendation telling all persons whoever it may concern that these four boys belong to a troop of scouts in New York City, and that they are to be trusted with your watch, your pocketbook or even your toothbrush."

"Keep still, Jimmy," said Ned, and then turning again to the gentleman he went on to explain further: "Of course we can show you letters from our folks at home, and even one from Harry's uncle inviting him to bring his chums along when he came to visit him at the Double-Cross Ranch."

"How's that? Do you mean the ranch kept by Colonel Job Haines?" demanded the man

who sat on the cracker box, apparently aroused by the mention of that name.

"He's my uncle on my mother's side," said Harry, suddenly perking up when he found that he was being drawn into the limelight by force of circumstances; "and I can show you a lot of his letters in my pack here, if you'll allow me to open it, Mister."

"Did you ever hear him say anything about a worthless puncher by the name of Thad Corbin?" asked the other with a chuckle.

"I should say I did, for when he was visiting our house last year he told us all about how this Corbin, who's one of the most famous of flyers now, took his first lesson while he was a cow-puncher on the Double-Cross Ranch. He made an aeroplane himself and flew it, too; but he didn't know as much then as he does now."

"Not by a jug-full, my son," interrupted the man on the box, eagerly.

"And so he came down faster'n he went up," continued Harry; "but it was only his collarbone that time, and like as not he's had heaps worse tumbles than that since then. And I reckon now you're that same Thad Corbin, sir. I've often read about you in the papers. And when we decided that somebody must be trying out a new type of dirigible, from which you could drop bombs on the deck of any battleship, none of us thought it was *you*. We're glad to know you, Mr. Corbin. Shall I show you the letters from Uncle Job Haines?"

"Well, there's no question in my mind about the truth of the story you spin, my son, but

because the stake that's being played for is of such tremendous value, perhaps it would be as well that you did so, and relieve my mind of every fear. We are through with our secret experiments, and they have been wonderfully successful."

"Yes," spoke up Jimmy again, while Harry was fumbling in the pack taken from the burro's back, to find the letters that would substantiate his story in all its particulars, "and you came within an ace of putting the lot of us on the blink with that last bomb you dropped in Death Valley. We happened to be camped there, and was watchin' the lantern flying in the sky when the bang came, knocking our poor burros over every-which-way for Sunday. It would a done the same by us only our smart scout master, Ned Nestor here, saw which way the thing was goin', and made the whole bunch of us kowtow to our tummies there in the sand."

"I'm glad that no one was injured," said Mr. Corbin, who seemed to be particularly interested in Jimmy; "you see, that was one of the reasons we came out to this lonely place, so that we might not be spied on, and at the same time to avoid doing any damage with our bombs. They are made of a new compound, and warranted to put the biggest dreadnaught in the world under the water if one can be dropped on the deck. Ah! you have found the letters, I see, Harry. Yes, I'd know Job's fist among a thousand. No need to open the packet, son; because I wouldn't be guilty of reading a single word. I believe everything you said to be true. And we hope you'll spend

the balance of the night with us in camp here. I'd be glad to bunk with any relation of Colonel Job Haines, the best man in the Southwest."

Well, after that it was all plain sailing. Having accepted the scouts for what they claimed to be, Captain Corbin could not do too much for them while they remained in the company of himself and the devoted band of assistants who had accompanied him all the way here over tortuous and thorny as well as super-heated paths, just to have the field to themselves while conducting their necessary experiments.

He explained to Ned just how cautious it was necessary to be in these days of keen competition, and especially in the field of aeronautics, where rival governments were jealous of the least advantage obtained along the line of improvements calculated to shorten the reign of the dreadnaught as mistress of the seas.

Of course he did not show them what the wonderful control improvements connected with dirigibles might be, or how it would change the complexion of the navies of the civilized world; but he did take them to see the big airship on the following morning, and even invited them to accompany him for a short trip, going now in broad daylight, since the trials by night had been finished.

They joyfully accepted, and would never cease to remember the pleasure it gave them; though as soon as our readers are aware this was by no means the first time Ned Nestor and his chums had been up among the clouds.

Jack had not forgotten the mysterious man mounted on a broncho who had fled at sight of the party, and had signaled to his friends by means of heliograph work that a strange lot of young fellows in uniform seemed to be looking around that part of the country, and as they could not be prospectors, and might have some connection with the rival house, it would be well for the airship men to be constantly on the watch.

They had known of the coming of Jimmy and the rest for quite some time, thanks to the McGraw voice, and were able to lay their plans looking to the ambush. But every one was glad that it had turned out to be a false alarm. The experiments had been so wonderfully successful that they were all in the best of spirits; and when men feel that way it is always a pleasure to be in their society.

There being no need of any hurry the scouts spent the whole of that same day, and also the succeeding night, in the company of Captain Corbin. They were induced to relate a number of their past experiences, though these were always told in a modest manner, save when Jimmy had a hand in the recital; and even his boasting was usually connected with the achievements of Ned, rather than anything he himself had accomplished.

When the boys once more turned their faces eastward, and struck out over the parched land that lay before them, they gave their new friends a parting cheer, and followed this up with a series of queer sounds that it would have puzzled Captain Corbin to understand had he not been

told that these boys belonged to the Wolf and the Black Bear Patrols, so that he guessed they were saluting with the cries of their respective divisions.

It would seem that after meeting so many tremendous difficulties, and managing to conquer them, the boys were entitled to a little peace, and that the balance of their overland journey from the sea to the cattle ranch away down in the southernmost corner of Nevada, and close to the wonderful Colorado River, would be altogether uneventful.

Whether this turned out to be so or not will have to be left for another telling, since we have come to the place where, with the passage of the terrible Death Valley safely accomplished, and the trail toward the Spring Valley Ranch of mountains well defined before them, it would seem that the four Boy Scouts had little to give them cause for anxiety or fear.

And lest the reader might worry over Jimmy's weakness it might be said in passing that in the country whither they were headed there was no lack of water, so that his recent sufferings were not likely to be repeated very soon.

THE END

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